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La Santa Muerte in Mexico City: The Cult and its Ambiguities

REGNAR ALBÆK KRISTENSEN

Abstract. This article explores the worship of La Santa Muerte through a geo-mapping of street altars in Mexico City followed by an ethnographic analysis of the devotees' relationships with the saint. I find that this saint has gained momentum among the fast-growing prison population over the last two decades. In contrast to studies that emphasise the desertification of mass incarceration elsewhere, this study finds that La Santa Muerte connects families across the social abyss of imprisonment. I suggest that the family-like relationships that devotees maintain with this saint are crucial to understanding her success. Rather than a one-dimensional sacred defender of criminals and police she is adopted by prisoners, prison officers, police and their families as a capricious 'family member', embracing the same ambivalence as the forces she helps to navigate.

Keywords: La Santa Muerte, death, penal state, folk religion, geo-mapping

Introduction

Over the last two decades, worship of La Santa Muerte ('Saint Death' in English) has attracted a remarkably large number of followers in Mexico. This skeleton saint, considered a sacred female personification of death by her devotees, has been the object of global curiosity since the cult first became public in 2001. Mexican and international journalists have been fascinated by the photogenic Santa Muerte, with the tangible result that most major broadcasters have shown scenes of devotees praying, deeply moved, in front of a skeleton figurine in Baroque dress. Several films (documentaries and fictional ones) have been produced about the saint and, in 2008, her main shrines (located in the notorious quarter of Tepito in Mexico City) found their way into *Lonely Planet Mexico* as major tourist sites.

Regnar Alabæk Kristensen is an Assistant Professor at the Institute for Cross-cultural and Regional Studies, University of Copenhagen Email: regnark@hum.ku.dk

Scholars have likewise been attracted to the study of the cult. I have followed the growth of the cult in Mexico City for the last ten years and have come across dozens of researchers at its main shrines. Most of them are anthropologists although sociologists, scholars of religious studies and history, psychologists and political scientists have also found them worth visiting. The vast majority are Master's students from local universities in Mexico City.[1,2] Despite this overwhelming interest, there has been little published on the subject, most likely due to its novelty but also perhaps because of the difficulty of studying the cult, given the lack of historical information available and the secrecy of the environment in which it developed.

Publications by scholars have focused mainly on Saint Death's genealogy and connection to the Mexican culture of death or the culture of popular Catholicism and Cuban Santería.[3] They discuss ideas of death and their multifaceted historical role in Mexican society from the time of the Conquest until the present day and tend to draw analogies between Baroque ideas of death in Mexico and those of this burgeoning cult. There is also scholarly interest in the inversion of cultural values that is embedded in the worship of this Baroque Virgin of Death, related to a more widespread and often animated debate

[1] Working for the UN in Mexico City, my wife and I stumbled upon an altar to Saint Death in November 2002. Astonished by the skeleton saint, my wife made a photo-documentary of the cult in 2003. From 2003–2007, we followed the progress of the cult in the streets of Mexico City and befriended the family behind the main street altar, erected by the colourful señora Doña Queta. Taking advantage of this friendship, I returned to academia and carried out a full-year's ethnographic fieldwork on the growing cult in 2008. For a full year, I followed the family of Doña Queta and two other families in Mexico City. In 2013 I was back in Mexico City to conduct a postdoctoral family study on one of the latter two families.

[2] Débora Sánchez Guajardo, 'La devoción de la Santa Muerte: un culto a lo católico', unpubl. Master's thesis, Universidad Iberoamericana, México DF, 2012. Perla Fragoso, 'La muerte santificada: la fe desde la vulnerabilidad: devoción y culto a la Santa Muerte en la Ciudad de México', unpubl. Master's thesis, Centro de Investigación en Antropología Social, CIESAS, México DF, 2007. Erica R. Álverez, Luis A. Gutiérrez, Taihana B. Nuevo, Lizethe A. Rodríguez, Alejandrina R. Ruiz and Oscar B. Ventura, 'Culto a la Santa Muerte: vida a través de la muerte', unpubl. Master's thesis, Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana, Unidad Xochimilco, México DF, 2007.

[3] Claudio Lomnitz, *Death and the Idea of Mexico* (New York: Zone Book, 2005). Juan Antonio Flores, 'La Santísima Muerte en Veracruz, México: vidas descarnadas y prácticas encarnadas', in Juan Antonio Flores and Luisa Abad González (eds.), *Etnografías de la muerte y culturas en America Latina* (Castilla-La Mancha: Ediciones de la Universidad de Castilla-La Mancha, 2007). Katia Perdigón, *La Santa Muerte* (México DF: Ediciones del Instituto Nacional de Antropología y Historia, INAH, 2008). Elsa Malvido, 'Crónicas de la buena muerte a la Santa Muerte en México', *Arqueología*, 13: 76 (2008), pp. 20–7. Perla Fragoso, 'De la calavera domada a la subversión santificada. La Santa Muerte, un nuevo imaginario religioso en México', *Cotidiano*, 26: 169 (2011), pp. 5–16. Alfonso Hernández, 'Devoción a la Santa Muerte y San Judas Tadeo en Tepito y anexas', *Cotidiano*, 26: 169 (2011), pp. 39–50. Raúl R. Uriarte and José Luis Cisneros, 'De la niña blanca y la flaquita, a la Santa Muerte: hacía la inversión del mundo religioso', *Cotidiano*, 26: 169 (2011), pp. 29–38. R. Andrew Chesnut, *Devoted to Death* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).

on the criminal environment of some of her devotees, a discussion that virtually all scholars and journalists participate in, one way or another. They largely agree that La Santa Muerte has principally thrived since the beginning of the 1990s on the fringes of Mexican society, a fact they more or less directly connect with the general insecurity of present-day Mexico. There is, however, no consensus regarding the extent and importance of this criminal sector, nor is there any in-depth knowledge of why La Santa Muerte attracts such people. There is clearly a need for in-depth knowledge about its occurrence and its meaning, and this forms the backdrop to the two parts of this article.

The first part explores the cult's magnitude and social context. This is analysed through a spatial census of the zones in which her worship has become strong in Mexico City. Its main conclusion is that devotees of La Santa Muerte are found in large numbers inside prisons, on the one hand, and in urban areas where the prisoners' families live, on the other. This finding is discussed in relation to the rapid growth in numbers of people with contacts in Mexico City's prisons since the economic crises of the mid-1990s, suggesting that the momentum behind this veneration is linked to the intersection between increasing violence in those areas, harsher and more ambiguous law enforcement, and miserable prison conditions. The second part subjects this connection to further scrutiny and explores, through an extended case study, the meaning of La Santa Muerte. I argue that La Santa Muerte's popularity and main attraction is her familial character as a 'child', 'sister', 'mother' and 'godmother'. She is adopted by the prisoners' families with all the love, anger, loyalty, betrayal and disappointment that this emotional attachment entails. From within the bosom of the family, she helps with concrete problems, although this engagement also creates social responsibilities which, if neglected, can lead them to fear her. The ambiguous social relationship that is maintained with her makes her both defender and castigator, and so she has become both a solution to and a cause of insecurity, in contrast to the more unambiguous protection of patron saints.

The Spatial Distribution of the Cult in Mexico City

Ever since the cult became public, estimates claiming that it has millions of followers have been widespread. The following census critically disproves those figures as highly exaggerated. Moreover, it shows that the cult's growth is concentrated in specific neighbourhoods of Mexico City, most of them known for being hotbeds of informal and illicit trade and violence. It would, however, be a mistake to conclude that the cult is violent. Rather, it reveals that there is a complex correlation between prison populations and those (police and family members) dealing with the prison system from the outside.

The allegation that La Santa Muerte is the patron saint of criminals has caught the attention of journalists, novelists and American and Mexican security experts alike.[4,5,6] By labelling her the patron saint of criminals, they are somehow claiming that Death has become their holy defender. These journalists (and some scholars) have largely focused on how infamous criminals might have used La Santa Muerte in sacrificial rites to plead for her protection. From there it has been a short step to connect the rise of La Santa Muerte with the economy of terror in present-day Mexico and to add an uncanny cultural level to the horror stories of ghastly violence that have been circulating since 2006. This connection with an extremely tense environment has stigmatised devotees. As soon as the saint's name is mentioned, it is virtually impossible to avoid a moral discussion of whether they are 'good' or 'evil', non-criminal or criminal.

Scholars have largely contested the media's anecdotal focus on renowned drug traffickers, tending instead to 'beautify' the devotees. They argue that the image of La Santa Muerte as the criminals' patron saint is nothing more than a narrow view of a popular devotion that embraces a wide spectrum of motivations and social backgrounds. Fragoso argues:

> [J]ust as there is no single modality or pillar in the cult of La Santa Muerte, it is also impossible to characterise her worshippers as part of a homogenous social segment. On the contrary, just as the skeleton saint has devotees who devote themselves to extreme forms of drug trafficking, she also has devotees who work in the informal sector, where they struggle every day against unfavourable social and economic conditions.[7]

Chesnut makes a similar point when he states that: 'One of the main points of this book is that Santa Muerte is a multifaceted saint, composed of many different colours [each colour representing a different modality]'.[8] This distinction between 'good' and 'evil' devotees has also been reproduced among the devotees themselves. As one informant put it, 'People think we are bad because we believe in La Santa Muerte. There may be a few bad people who trust in her but we are not all bad people. For instance, there are children who trust in her' (male devotee 2008).

[4] Alma Guillemoprieto, 'The Murderers of Mexico', article, 28 October 2010, *New York Review of Books*. Sergio R. González, *Huesos en el Desierto* (México DF: Anagrama, 2006), pp. 68–9. Martín Barrón, Researcher at the National Institute for Penal Research (INACIPE). Quoted in *El Reforma*, 8 January 2011 in an article by Antonio Nieto, 'Piden los criminales apoyo a la Santa Muerte'.

[5] Homero Arijdis, *La Santa Muerte* (México DF: Editores Alfaguara, 2001).

[6] Pamela L. Bunker, Lisa J. Campbell and Robert J. Bunker, 'Torture, Beheadings and Narcocultos', in Robert J. Bunker (ed.), *Small Wars and Insurgencies*, 21: 1, (Abingdon: Routledge, 2010) pp. 145–78, available at www.tandfonline.com/toc/fswi20/21/1#.VE5ILSLF9ik

[7] Fragoso, 'De la calavera domada a la subversión santificada', p. 13, author's translation.

[8] Chesnut, *Devoted to Death*, p. 188.

This practice among journalists, scholars and devotees of classifying followers into the majority who use her for honest purposes and the few who use her for evil, raises the question of scale. To what degree do we actually know how many devotees are doing what? It is no easy task to classify and count devotees' moral engagements. Dark practices are simply too murky for quantification. Moreover, few people will openly admit that they have called on La Santa Muerte to harm their neighbour or protect them when doing 'evil'. Even if one's wishes are more innocent (e.g. to recover from drug addiction), it is considered rude to ask devotees what favours they are asking La Santa Muerte for. These frequent quantitative assessments are therefore mostly based on devotees' personal experiences and intuition, and often verge on rumour and conspiracy. Vague statements of 'a few', 'some', 'many', 'nearly all', 'the majority', and so on, flourish and are at times given more authority if quoted by a leading personality from inside the cult. This guesswork inevitably takes on a more anecdotal nature and rarely presents empirical material for general conclusions.

Andrew Chesnut discussed the magnitude of multifaceted approaches to the saint in his recent book *Devoted to Death* (2012). Some reviewers have criticised the work as 'quasi-populist'; he is, however, the first scholar to try to calculate the cult's popularity systematically.[9] His estimates are based on the numbers of different coloured votive candles sold in shops and found at public altars. The premise for this is that the candle's colour correlates with the devotee's petition to La Santa Muerte. For example, black votive candles indicate a desire to harm others; red candles indicate the skeleton saint's role as a love doctor; yellow/golden candles refer to her role as a job finder and prosperity angel, and so forth. This is how small prayer books sold in shops and witchcraft markets in Mexico City and elsewhere tend to present the functional meaning of the colours of votive candles.[10]

Ethnographically, there is little doubt that devotees approach La Santa Muerte, in line with other popular Catholic saints, to plead for her help with concrete problems. Yet I find this premise of a visual marker of the invisible petitions and practices questionable for two main reasons. On the one hand, devotees emphasise that their petitions to La Santa Muerte depend much less on the colours of the votive candles than on the humility, constancy and faith they show in their daily companionship with her. I will return to this social relationship with La Santa Muerte in the second part. On the other hand, the supposed meaning of the coloured votive candles is often confusing. White candles, by far the most commonly sold in Mexico City, are, for

[9] David Lehmann 'Book review', *Journal of Latin American Studies*, 45: 1 (2013), pp. 195–7.
[10] Cf. Oriana Velázques, *'La Santa Muerte: milagros, ofrendas, oraciones y otros temas'* (México DF: Colección Luna Roja, 2006). Abel Cruz, *'La ayuda de la Santa Muerte'* (México DF: Planeta, 2006).

example, perceived as being good for persuading La Santa Muerte to protect you. And yet this protection could relate to avoiding being caught while stealing or protection from thieves. Black and white candles therefore potentially overlap with each other.

To avoid these pitfalls of ambiguity of meaning and irregular use of the colours of votive candles, I have focused on another material aspect of the cult, street altars, to analyse the devotees' social and emotional backgrounds and roughly estimate the total number of devotees. The premise for this analysis is that the location and concentration of street altars somehow points to social and historical aspects that have been fundamental to the cult's growing momentum.

Geo-mapping of street altars dedicated to La Santa Muerte in Mexico City

Although the veneration of La Santa Muerte can be traced back to Mexico City in the 1940s and 1950s, according to the older devotees I interviewed, it first began to gain momentum within Mexico City's prisons in the 1990s.[11] Until then it had been considered an occult saint even within the family, since La Santa Muerte was not known as an intimate family friend as she is today but rather as a saint for, say, cursing an unfaithful husband (this would involve reciting secret prayers to her at midnight for nine nights).[12] The secrecy that surrounded such humiliating and violent incantations prevented much from being known about the saint outside witchcraft markets and scorned women seeking a more dramatic kind of supernatural retribution. Indeed, the growth of the cult inside prisons might very well be related to the marital situations of the mothers of the inmates. However, I have little ethnographic material on this possible transformation in the cult from embracing rejected women to including their incarcerated sons. The material I present is instead connected to the second wave of the cult's growth, which dates back to 2000 when a series of public altars started to emerge in the streets of Mexico City.

The secrecy and occult status of La Santa Muerte changed drastically with the introduction of massive public street ceremonies in 2001. That year, a woman called Doña Queta and her family erected a street altar to La Santa Muerte in front of their home in Alfarería Street, Tepito, and, soon after, she followed up the interest shown by passers-by by inviting people to a

[11] For a historical discussion see Claudio Lomnitz (2005) and Katia Perdigón (2008). Due to a general lack of historical knowledge among devotees (the grand majority of the devotees I have spoken to do not trace their devotion back more than ten years) and since the focus of this article is on the recent formation of the cult, I will not proceed further in a discussion of how Saint Death might be related to the general culture of death in Mexico.

[12] This is how Oscar Lewis (the oldest record of La Santa Muerte) presented her more than 50 years ago. Oscar Lewis, *The Children of Sánchez: Autobiography of a Mexican Family* (New York: Vintage Books, 1963), p. 290.

Catholic-inspired rosary that was to take place right in front of the altar. Such street altars spread quickly, mushrooming throughout the metropolitan area. Today they are very popular gathering points for the fast-growing number of devotees. They come to complete their vows (called *mandas*) and seek La Santa Muerte's spiritual help in their often desperate situations. It is here that they also meet other devotees and gain inspiration and knowledge of how best to persuade her. The massive media coverage of the public rosaries at the street altars has understated the importance of these gatherings. As such, street altars are today essential hubs for what I have elsewhere argued is a non-centralised veneration of La Santa Muerte.[13]

I find these hubs have several advantages in terms of completing a census. Street altars to La Santa Muerte are visual topological points of worship. They are easy to count and the principal figurine, as a rule, also has a 'birthday', celebrated every year on the day she was placed in the street. This makes it possible to record her public growth. Devotees clearly distinguish between street altars and private altars, the latter being found in manifestly higher numbers inside devotees' homes. To become a devotee is, nonetheless, strongly linked to both constructing an altar to La Santa Muerte at home and carrying its figurine(s) with you when participating in public street ceremonies. The popular Catholic idea that transference of sacred power may occur between religious images in proximity to one another is clearly also at play here.[14] The fact that it is hard to find devotees with more than 15–20 years of worship further indicates that the number of private altars has grown in parallel with the public ones. The number of devotees participating in the ceremonies at street altars thus also gives us a rough idea of the number of private altars likely to be found at any given time.

Whereas the 'birthdays' and number of street altars provide us with a rough indicator for estimating the overall growth of the cult in Mexico City, I also find it helpful that street figurines of La Santa Muerte have an address. Each image 'inhabits' a particular street. It could be argued that street altars are not placed in the same areas as devotees live. The fact that many of the people gathering at these ceremonies travel a long distance to do so does not necessarily contradict my claim that the majority of devotees generally live close to a street altar. My experience is that devotees move between areas with an equal concentration of street altars (e.g. somebody from Iztapalapa may attend a rosary in the centre and vice versa).[15] It is also well

[13] Regnar Kristensen, 'Når Døden er Sexet', *Jordens Folk*, 42 (2007) pp. 46–53.

[14] Cf. Robert A.Orsi (1985) and also David Morgan, *Visual Piety* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1998).

[15] When all new tip-offs led back to existing street altars, the author and his research assistant started to visit the 'white areas' on the map of the Federal District to ensure accuracy. More than 250 of the 1,983 colonias in the Federal District were visited.

known that the person or family that erected and take care of street altar nearly always lives right behind it.

By May 2008, I had registered 152 street altars, 132 of them in the Federal District and 20 in the State of Mexico. The number of street altars in the Federal District was a systematic and complete count, in contrast to the visits made to altars in the State of Mexico and elsewhere. My best estimate would be that the urban part of Mexico City belonging to the State of Mexico had, in 2008, a similar number of street altars to the Federal District. This would give a total of approximately 300 street altars in Mexico City's metropolitan area. I have participated in more than 50 street rosaries, each consisting of between 10 and 4,000 devotees, with an approximated mean of 100 persons. A fairly conservative estimate would therefore be that, as of 2008, we were dealing with a phenomenon encompassing some 30,000 devotees praying in the streets of Mexico City every month.

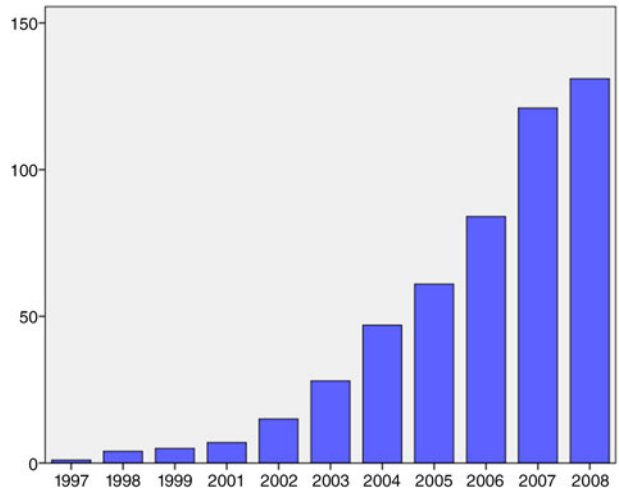
Since devotees participate in these rosaries on an irregular basis, it is hard to estimate the total number of followers in Mexico City from this number. Yet no matter what coefficient it is multiplied by, 30,000 people gathering in public every month is already a high figure, even considering that the metropolitan area of Mexico City is home to approximately 20 million. These numbers are, nonetheless, far less than the estimates made by people inside the cult. They were claiming, back in 2008, that approximately 1,500 street altars had been erected in Mexico City and that La Santa Muerte had between 3 and 5 million devotees in Mexico. These are also the figures that the media and Chesnut have referred to when discussing the size of the cult.[16]

The first street altars to La Santa Muerte were erected in the *colonia* Buenos Aires, which is a notoriously crime-ridden district of central Mexico City where spare parts for cars are primarily sold. In 1998, this district became the focus of press attention following the brutal murder of a local group of youths by a number of criminal investigation officers (*judiciales*). It was not, however, until Doña Queta's street altar was erected in September 2001 in Alfarería Street in Tepito that the growth in street altars took off. There are many explanations for this sudden increase, the most likely being that public veneration did not spread until the ceremonial Catholic-inspired street rosaries for La Santa Muerte were initiated by Doña Queta, and then imitated by others.

Given the constraints of covering the whole metropolitan area, this spatial analysis is restricted to the Federal District. There are no equivalent fine-tuned geographical statistics available on economic income and prison populations in the State of Mexico from which an analysis of the whole metropolitan area could be made. The part of Mexico City belonging to the State of Mexico

[16] Chesnut, *Devoted to Death*, pp. 8–9.

Table 1. *Street Altars Dedicated to La Santa Muerte in Mexico City's Federal District (Cumulative Number/Year). Note that the Count for 2008 Includes Merely the First Four Months that Year (colour version available online at http://journals@cambridge.org/LAS)*



is generally poorer, and with newer housing projects. However, I registered only minor differences in terms of the ceremonies and the people participating in the street rosaries in the State of Mexico (in Nezahuacoyotl, Ecatepec, Atizapan de Zaragoza and Chimalhuacan). These altars were also in areas with high levels of violence and large prison populations (e.g. El Sol in Nezahuacoyoltl).

The map indicates that the sudden growth in street altars has not spread evenly throughout the urban space of Mexico City's Federal District. It also reveals that the majority of public altars are erected in the poorer, though not the very poorest, areas of the Federal District. They are found in lower-middle income zones where harsh living conditions are not so much the direct result of poverty but of fluctuating incomes and violence. Economic purchasing power is often lower in outlying areas of the city, where there are no street altars. The most notable concentration of street altars was found in a crescent embracing the historical centre (colonias Guerrero, Morelos, La Merced, Doctores). Moreover, there were concentrations of street altars in colonias Pensil (Miguel Hidalgo), Barrio Norte (Álvaro Obregón), Gabriel Ramos Millán (Iztacalco), Vicente Guerrero, Ejercito de Oriente and San Miguel Teotongo (Iztapalapa), Gabriel Hernández and La Cruz (Gustavo

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A. Madero). The vast majority of all these colonias are known for their high levels of assault and gang violence.

One important clarification should be made before proceeding with the geographical mapping of where the inmates came from in 2008. The maps do not necessarily give the whole picture of the criminals' geographical background. Widespread impunity caused by an inefficient and corrupt legal system tends to alter such mapping disfavouring the poorer or less influential areas. What the maps do reveal is the frequency of families with at least one relative in one of the Federal District's jails within a small geographical zone (colonia). In order to assess whether exposure to prison correlates with worship of La Santa Muerte, I superimposed the prison population onto the urban atlas of the street altars.

This mapping indicates the very high probability of coming across a street altar to La Santa Muerte in a colonia that has a high prison population. The 80 colonias with at least one street altar had, in March 2008, an average of 136 members of their population serving time in jail, whereas the colonias with no street altar had an average of 12. The crescent that circles the historical centre, covering the northern and eastern outskirts of colonia Centro, colonia Guerrero, the two colonias of Morelos and colonia Doctores, includes the top five colonias for total number of inmates (and street altars). The two colonias of Morelos, which roughly make up Tepito, boasted 1,501 inmates alone. These colonias did not have the highest proportion of population in prison but they nonetheless scored high when correlated for differences in population size (with the exception of colonia Obrera where there were no street altars), as shown by the gradation in colour (the darker the red, the higher the percentage of the local population serving time in prison). The many public prayers for inmates and the testimonies of devotees in my own and other scholars' work underscore this connection between jails and street altars. In other words, everything points to a strong connection between La Santa Muerte and prisons.

Spatially-distributed crime and law enforcement

Loïc Wacquant's influential analysis of the expansion of the neoliberal penal state taught us how the global trend towards being tougher on crime (also petty crime) has resulted in an increasing 'penalisation of poverty' in both France and the United States.[17] Scholars in the United States have taken up his line of research and shown how disadvantaged neighbourhoods have

[17] Loïc Wacquant, *Punishing the Poor: The Neoliberal Government of the Social Insecurity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009). See also Didier Fassin, *Enforcing Order: An Ethnography of Urban Policing* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013).

taken the greater share of that 'toughening' of law enforcement.[18] Likewise scholars have argued that there has been a shift from 'policing' to 'security' in Latin America, where the shared idiom of violence in the population has underpinned support for tougher policing and zero tolerance measures. Yet they also suggest that these neoliberal reforms have produced particularly ambiguous versions of the penal state in Latin America due to inefficiency and corruption.[19]

Mexico City is no exception. Its police forces were 'reformed' during the 1990s and 2000s to cope more efficiently with the general public's perception of fast-growing crime rates and pervasive corruption inside the police and legal system. The latter was epitomised by Mexico City's exceptionally corrupt police commissioner Arturo Durazo Moreno (*El Negro Durazo*) in the 1970s and 1980s. The city government's rhetoric on cracking down on crime and criminal corruption only intensified with the political shift from the old Partido Revolucionario Institucional (Institutional Revolutionary Party, PRI) to the more left-wing (Partido de la Revolución Democática (Democratic Revolutionary Party, PRD) in the late 1990s. In 2003, the former New York mayor, Rudolph Giuliani, was invited by the Federal District's Police Force (SSPDF) (with money from local magnate Carlos Slim Helu) to assess how security could be improved in Mexico City. This resulted in 146 recommendations from Giuliani and his staff aimed at strengthening security under the popular name of 'zero tolerance'.

The most palpable outcome of this crackdown on crime is that the prison population has increased. Across the country, it rose from 87,700 in 1992 to 176,400 in 2002.[20] This increase continued over the next decade in the Federal District of Mexico City, where the prison population increased from 28,667 in January 2005 to 40,232 in January 2011.[21] The effectiveness of tougher measures against crime is subject to wide debate.[22] Many of the recommendations Giuliani made were not fully implemented but others were.

[18] Todd R. Clear, *Imprisoning Communities. How Mass Incarceration Makes Disadvantaged Neighbourhoods Worse* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007). Philippe Bourgois, *In Search of Respect: Selling Crack in the Barrio* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

[19] Marcus-Michael Müller 'The Rise of the Penal State in Latin America', *Contemporary Justice Review: Issues in Criminal, Social, and Restorative Justice*, 15: 1 (2012), pp. 57–76. John Gledhill, paper 'The Production of Insecurity in Brazil and Mexico' (Annual Conference of the Society for Latin American Studies: Manchester, UK, April 12, 2013).

[20] Elena Azaola and Marcelo Bergman, 'El sistema penitenciario mexicano', in Arturo Alvarado (ed.) *La reforma de la justicia en México* (México DF: El Colegio de México, 2008), p. 749.

[21] http://www.reclusorios.df.gob.mx/reclusorios/estadisticas/index.html, accessed 28 April 2011.

[22] Mario J. Arroyo, 'Evaluación de la estrategia de cero tolerancia en la Ciudad de México', in Arturo Alvarado (ed.), *La reforma de la justicia en México* (México DF: El Colegio de México, 2008), pp. 389–422. Hector Castillo Berthier and Gareth A. Jones 'Mean Streets: Youth, Violence, and Daily Life in Mexico City', in Gareth A. Jones and Dennis Rodgers (eds.), *Youth Violence in Latin America: Gangs and Juvenile Justice in Perspective* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), pp. 183–202.

Street vendors in the historic city centre have been forced out and those selling in Tepito have been obliged to move the metal structures of their stalls at night. Raids on informal markets and nightclubs have also escalated, in particular in the more notorious areas around the historic centre as well as in the vicinity of the city's most notorious markets (e.g. Santa Cruz and El Salado in Iztapalapa and San Felipe de Jesús in Gustavo A. Madero). These are all known for selling all kinds of products ranging from honestly obtained to stolen, smuggled or pirated goods, and including drugs and weapons. As Castillo and Jones note, this shift from policing to security has meant that 'many will have been picked up in sweeps of markets, highway intersections or nightclubs in operations known as *redadas, razzias*, or more popularly *apañones*'.[23]

It is therefore no coincidence that the darkest areas on the maps (where the bulk of the prison population comes from) are also areas with large informal street markets and highway intersections nearby. However, it is hard to ascertain the extent to which this latest increase in imprisonment is related to law-enforcement policies or rising crime rates. Mexico's membership of NAFTA (North Atlantic Free Trade Agreement) and the severe economic crises of the mid-1990s hit informal commerce particularly hard, driving vendors to turn to smuggling, piracy and drug dealing in greater numbers than before.[24] The point I wish to make, however, is not whether those being 'swept up' are criminals or victims of the neoliberal economy and law enforcement. My question instead relates to the characteristics of the areas where a growing number of people have, in one way or another, been 'swept up' and have had to cope with the police, the courts and the prisons. My data suggest that these people tend to come from urban areas with high concentrations of both informal and illicit trade. That devotion to La Santa Muerte has risen in the same areas does not necessarily imply that this saint is related to prison in itself. One indication of this is that many prison officers and police officers worship her too. I would instead suggest that the relationship with prison lies in the fact that many of the conditions for worshipping her are fulfilled there: the violence, the risk, the power relations at work beyond one's control.

When 'swept up' or routinely arrested in these areas, people come face to face with a 'penal state' which Marcos-Michael Müller argues 'reinforces the highly exclusionary tendencies of Latin American society inside [the]

[23] Ibid., p. 186.

[24] The informal commerce in Tepito, La Merced and some of the questioned areas of Iztapalapa and Gustavo Madero began to include smuggled products from the United States in the 1970s (the so-called *fayuca*). After joining NAFTA, smuggling from China, pirating and illicit drugs were also introduced. This conflated informal with illicit trade and increased the already high levels of violence.

prison system … [and on the other hand] … exposes its objects of governance to more violent, arbitrary and illegal forms of penalisation when compared to the "first world"'.[25] That the repetitive crackdowns on crime have enforced a perverse prison economy is beyond doubt. Criminologist Victor Payá describes how the overcrowded prisons of the Federal District are places of permanent conflict and violence.[26] However I would not go as far as Müller to claim that these are arbitrary forms of penalisation. Neither do I find the legal system consistently corrupt as middle-class public opinion often suggests. Rather I find, as Müller also points out, that the institutions of law and order embrace both corrupt and incorrupt practices. In this opaque environment, it becomes harder to know in advance if the law-enforcement officers are 'straight' or not. This dichotomy makes the roundabout of the institutions more unpredictable in its outcome (dependent upon legal evidence, the law, bribes and connections) than the recognised corrupt (dependent upon bribes and connections) or the ideally incorrupt (dependent upon legal evidence and the law) institutions.

Several interrelated socio-political phenomena were thus at work when Doña Queta decided to erect her street altar in 2001. The economic crises and the increase in illicit merchandise for sale in the informal markets, combined with escalating police efforts, had already led to an increase in the prison population and a corresponding increase in violence within the overcrowded jails. Moreover, the police force was supposedly reformed to cope with pervasive corruption but the result, I would suggest, was a more unpredictable law and order management rather than a 'cleansing' of the institution. Those arrested are still met with an inefficient and largely corrupt, albeit more ambiguous, legal system than under El Negro Durazo. The incapacity of the Federal District's legal institutions to process the increasing number of arrests has only added to this ambiguity. Many individuals are often locked up for six months or more and then released because the plaintiff drops the case due to bribes, a lack of evidence or mistakes made in the court procedures. Meanwhile, those imprisoned fear the outcome and their safety. Many of them later visit street altars to give thanks to La Santa Muerte for having mediated on their behalf or on behalf of a close family member in a legal dispute and for protecting them while inside jail. They often promise La Santa Muerte something if she intervenes favourably in their legal process while they await the verdict. It is not hard to imagine that being released because the charges have been dropped might be interpreted as a favour from La Santa Muerte. Taking this into consideration, we begin to visualise a strong correlation between the flow of people coming into contact with the prison system and the upsurge in the cult.

[25] Müller, 'The Rise of the Penal State in Latin America', p. 58.
[26] Víctor A. Payá, *Vida y muerte en la cárcel: estudio sobre la situación institucional de los prisoneros* (México DF: Plaza y Váldez S. A. de C. V., 2006).

And yet a correlation between La Santa Muerte's rise in popularity and the disparate growth of the prison population in the urban geography since the early 1990s does not explain why these people are so attracted to this saint. Similar studies of how the violence associated with mass imprisonment affects disadvantaged neighbourhoods have been conducted by criminologists and anthropologists[27] but whereas they concentrate on how structural marginalisation reproduces crime by negatively affecting the cohesion of social institutions and families living in targeted zones, this census suggests that violence and mass imprisonment may have had other effects in Mexico City. The growing cuIt of La Santa Muerte appears to connect rather than separate families across the social abyss of imprisonment. This raises the question of how La Santa Muerte mediates between families. In the second part, we shall look into her special attraction, power and the meanings she embraces within inmates' family networks.

The Meaning of La Santa Muerte

Ever since La Santa Muerte became public, there have been heated debates concerning her nature and, alongside this, also a debate concerning the meaning she has among her devotees. Thus far we have confirmed the widespread claim that devotees are often connected to the growing prison population and, through this, also to Mexico's dark underbelly of crime and violence. Despite this connection, I shall argue that La Santa Muerte is not approached as a patron saint for criminals, as public opinion often has it, but is rather seen as an ambiguous familial saint embracing both good and evil. In this world, the distinction between good and evil, formal and informal, is problematic since the devotees often find themselves forced to operate on both sides of the moral chasm. I suggest this ambiguity is what makes her capable of maintaining unity among the separated and often hard-pushed families who are caught up in the equally ambiguous legal system.

The female family friend

No devotee doubts that La Santa Muerte is a woman. The female figurines of death are dressed, fed, talked to, shouted at and adored like other female family members. She has even penetrated into the bedrooms of her devotees. I shall argue that this makes her, above all else, a family saint. Yet La Santa Muerte is both more and less than a family member. She is believed to mediate with God

[27] Fassin, *Enforcing Order*. David Garland, *The Culture of Control: Crime and Social Order in Contemporary Society* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2001). Clear, *Imprisoning Communities*. Bourgois, *In Search of Respect*.

and yet, when asked, devotees state that her figurine is merely a material representation of a sacred power generically called la *santa* or *santita*. Despite such statements not being uncommon, caring for her figurine almost as a family member seems vital to her intermediary efficacy. The main question for devotees is how to cohabit with her figurine. They worry about how they can please her and try hard to avoid incurring her wrath.

Devotees call her, *nena, niña, manita, flaquita, valedorcita, bandita, cabroncita, hermana, madrecita, comadre* and *madrina*, among others. All these terms refer to a close friend or relative. They are often conflated in the same word, e.g. the terms manita and nena refer to a 'female friend' and a 'baby girl' but they are also popularly used in Mexico to address one's youngest sister. La Santa Muerte is thus not merely addressed as a benevolent female saint. To a certain extent she also becomes a part of the devotee's family, taking different generational positions, be it as 'little mother' (madrecita), godmother or co-mother (madrina or comadre), sister (hermana and manita), child (nena and niña) or female friend (manita, nena, flaquita) and, finally also as the capricious one (cabroncita). I find it striking that most inmates call their figurines 'godmother', as the term is also used to refer to the judicial policeman who acts as their henchman.[28] Her family position is, nevertheless, not fixed within a concrete kinship structure. Many people call their santa both 'child', 'mother' and 'godmother' at the same time, indicating a more capricious kind of character than ordinary saints.

The semantic content of their relationship with her is also articulated in the way they speak and act towards their figurine. Sometimes they address her with the formal *usted,* paying due respect to her as a 'godmother', but most of the time they speak to her more intimately, using the informal *tú*. There are also devotees who treat her violently, as if they were ordering a child around: 'I pulled your ears once, twice, three times … and you still don't get it, well have some more' (male devotee yelling at his santa). A former inmate spoke to me about his santa in more conjugal terms.

> I promised her once not to drink and here I go again, drinking anyway. I tried to apologise, telling her '*madrecita*, I know I promised you, but I did not mean it' … but it was bullshit! Of course she'll be angry. Wouldn't you be angry? I tell you, no woman will allow you to promise her sincere love and then cheat on her. That is how she is.

Others speak to her as if she were a soul mate.

> If I leave my *madrina* I feel bad and alone. So I never leave her. I have her as a soul mate (*vale*[dor]*cita* [friend] and *bandita*) to protect me. She tells me in my dreams

[28] Paul Chevigny, 'Mexico City, the Federal District', in *Edge of a Knife: Police Violence in the Americas*. (New York: The New Press, 1995), pp. 227–48.

who is going to betray me; how can I betray her? I will not change my *madrina* for anyone, because if I do, I will be punished.

(male inmate)[29]

La Santa Muerte's capricious temper and taste for expensive food, clothes and mariachi music points also to a popular female character contesting the self-sacrificing, silent woman (*abnegada*) promoted in the notion of *marianísmo*.[30] Devotees find that she is easily angry and they believe she may castigate them severely if betrayed. On the other hand, humility and constancy can earn her loyalty, as in an ideal marriage. In the following extended case, these gendered family relations are played out in a critical situation in which a minor conflict between two families resulted in the father's incarceration and the mother having to go into hiding. On the one hand, it is about money, justice and revenge. On the other, it is an unravelling of complex family relationships when faced with the ambiguities of the Mexican legal system. As we shall see, it falls to the family to deal with lawyers, judges and thugs inside the jails. I suggest that devotees' relationships with the saint draw on some of the female values found in Mexican popular culture (embracing fidelity, forbearance and humility as well as infidelity, bad temper and vanity), and these share the ambivalence of the forces La Santa Muerte helps to navigate.[31]

The arrest, jail and trial

I first met David at his street altar three days after the police had arrested four of his closest family members. He allowed me to follow discreetly the family's efforts to pursue the case through the police, the courts and La Santa Muerte. The father Edgar, mother Marina and Uncle David were all interviewed in the first three weeks following the arrests. All names have been changed. Edgar and Marina live in a lower-middle class housing development in an insecure part of Ecatepec while Uncle David lives in a highly insecure area of street vendors in the Federal District. Due to the complexity of the family relations at stake with La Santa Muerte and between relatives, I have chosen to let the three protagonists tell their own story. The mother, Marina, starts the narrative with the

[29] My translation of transcript interview from the unpublished Master's thesis of Álvares et al., pp. XIII–XV.

[30] Christián Parker, *Popular Religion and Modernization in Latin America: A Different Logic*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1996). See also Evelyn Stevens, 'Marianísmo: The Other Face of Machismo in Latin America', in Ann Pescatello (ed.) *Male and Female in Latin America* (Pittsburgh, PA: Pittsburgh University Press, 1973), pp. 89–101.

[31] For an extensive discussion on popular culture and gender values in Mexico see Claudio Lomnitz, *Exit from the Labyrinth* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press 1992). For a discussion on the sinful and productive world at the intersection between perfection and imperfection in Catholic morality see Maya Mayblin, *Gender, Catholicism, and Morality in Brazil: Virtuous Husbands, Powerful Wives* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2010).

conflict, and the father Edgar follows up on jail, while Uncle David narrates the dealings with lawyers and judges.

Marina

Two years ago, there was a small fight between two neighbouring girls. One of them told her mother but, instead of dealing with the right person [i.e. the actual culprit], she accused me. I told her angrily that, for me, there was no problem in getting into a fight, but that she should look instead for the person who was the real cause of her daughter's problem. Then, she turned on my daughter and they had a bit of a fight until people separated them. Afterwards, she threatened to report my daughter to the police but chose [instead] to insult us, shouting obscenities at us every time we met her or some of her family. Two years passed. I had gone to the nearby market with my eldest daughters. We were dragging our little shopping trolley after us along the street and suddenly this neighbour tried to run us over with her car. She only just missed us, but I saw her daughter making obscene gestures. I promptly turned around and indicated to the woman that I wanted to fight (*darnos en la torre*). She ignored me. Instead, she continued on into the market with her daughter, where they came across my niece Hilda, who is just 14 years old. She hit her and then threatened to send for her husband, who is a police officer. My niece's mother called and told me this over the cell phone. I was unhappy with the whole situation and quickly went to look for my niece. I found her arguing with this neighbour and her daughter in the street. Annoyed, I told my niece, 'Okay, you take the daughter and I'll take her'. I struck her hard, but she didn't respond. We stopped a taxi and went home, where I immediately knelt before my *santita* [little Santa Muerte] and begged her to protect me with her great cloak.

At six o'clock, the police arrived. They arrested my sister, my niece, my daughter and my husband. The officers threatened them with guns. It was really awful. The police officers wouldn't take me with them, even though I stubbornly asked them to do so. At the police station, my husband told me they had beaten him up when he arrived. Shortly after, my daughter's father-in-law arrived with a lawyer to defend our case. He told us that there was nothing to be done except leave the case to the court where it would be resolved in the next eight to twelve months. That worried me. It was just a street fight. What had this woman told the police to make it seem so serious? We borrowed 3,500 pesos (300 USD) from my daughter's father-in-law to pay for copies of the neighbour's statement. Then we realised she was accusing us of burglary. Moreover, she was accusing my husband of having fondled her daughter's breasts. My sister, my daughter and my niece had all apparently hit her and, finally, I had robbed her. I was paralysed on realising what offences they were accusing us of. All doors seemed closed.

The next morning my nephew Pepe, two of my daughters, my cousins and the rest of my family were with me at Uncle David's home. I started to ask *La Santita* to open a door for me, just one door, to solve this problem. Shortly after, a lawyer who knew my husband finally answered my calls. He told me that I could not return to the police station because they would also lock me up. But from what my family has told me, this lawyer eventually succeeded in getting the charges against the 14-year-old girl dropped. He also managed to get my sister and my daughter released. Only my husband could not leave. The next day, my husband was moved to prison and I had to stay undercover

because of the arrest warrant. Fortunately my family is supporting us and, thank God and *La Santita,* we have been able to borrow and spend more money than we have ever had.

I have a son-in-law who sells toys at the Sonora market. He says this neighbour often passes by. Why? Because she likes to spend money harming others! [The Sonora Market is a market for both toys and magic]. I also have my *santita* and *virgencita* in my house to protect us, but I do not spend money on things to harm others. Why? Because we are not bad people. But why does this neighbour hate us? She wants to break up our family. Perhaps because she has no family, or does not know how to take care of the family she has. We want to make a counter-charge because they have offended us. They called us thieves and accused a girl of only 14 years of age of assault. My integrity as a mother is on the floor, to say nothing of what happened to my poor husband.

La Santita has helped us already. When I got home after the fight, I knelt in front of her, made the sign of the cross and pleaded with her to protect me. When the police officers came, they did not arrest me, despite my telling them to do so. Moreover, I spent the first day at the police station, where the neighbours told the police officers my name and pointed at me, and still nothing happened. After we discovered that my husband could not leave prison because of the spell from this woman, I started pleading with La Santa to open a path for him. I do not know if my husband has promised her something. I never promise her anything in return. I just give her what I have. If I see some beautiful flowers, I buy them and give them to her. I offer her tequila and water and sometimes, when I'm in bed, a cigarette, too, because I have her in my bedroom. While I'm tidying the bedroom I ask her 'Ay, would you like a cigarette *manita*?' I light her cigarette together with one for myself and we talk a little. Now I feel calmer but I miss my home, my things and my family. Sometimes I am afraid but then I feel safe again, because I am invisible to them. *La Santa* conceals me.'

Edgar

The people in my cell looked really mean. The beds were concrete shelves. I had a very narrow space on the floor under one of them, where I couldn't even turn around. Nor could I move my arms or legs. I didn't sleep the first few nights for fear of being suffocated. They sometimes come at night and suffocate you with pillows (*cobijazo*). I tried to avoid even the slightest problem, because there is no mercy in there. They rob. They take your shoes, your T-shirt; they are all 'lend me this or that', which means that your clothes and shoes are not necessarily your own. You can do nothing about it. What's more, they come to your cell and give you three punches, but three hard ones I tell you, if you don't pay them for protection. Those inmates whose families do not support them with money might make a *tranza* (crooked deal) by selling drugs, liquor, whatever.

They sent two guys to receive me as soon as I arrived. They wanted 3,000 pesos for getting me off cleaning duty (*fajina*). I told them that it would leave my family without any money. Because of my negative response, they punched me in the head. They realised there was no money to be had from me, so they sent me over to clean the toilets. 'Hurry up and clean the floor mops too', they told me. I noticed one of them had La Santa tattooed on his neck and I commented, 'You have *la nena* with you; she looks beautiful.' He responded by asking me if I also trusted in her. I told

him that the prison guards had taken my scapular [devotional amulet] upon arrival and I let him know about my uncle's street altar. Returning to the cell, I met the inmate El Profe. We started talking and he asked me if I had been told about the money. He advised me to give in and pay whatever I had. 'Look', he said, 'we are in the reception cells now. Afterwards they will send you into what we call 'the fire'. There, everything gets slightly more difficult. They have bigger knives and ice picks. In the end, they will make your family pay by hospitalising you. They also kidnap. They tie you to the bars and call your family and if they do not transfer money to an account …, well, you'd better not let your daughters visit you. They might kidnap them too.' On hearing this, I became more anxious and asked my family for the money to pay.

After I had calmed down, I began to discover the jail with El Profe. Walking around with him, I noticed many *santitas*. Only two cells in every ten did not have her. I called my uncle over the phone and told him. He came, together with my cousin Paco, for a visit the same day. As he was getting ready to leave, El Profe passed by and asked him to stay a little longer. Somebody wanted to see him. He accepted reluctantly and was escorted to the other side of the prison where inmates are not allowed. I stayed in my cell and imagined the worst but, after a while, he returned. Paco was carrying a huge wooden santa or *madrina*, as they call her inside the jail. My uncle and cousin quickly said goodbye and left without further comment.

After the cell doors had been locked, somebody came and escorted me to a storeroom somewhere in the prison. Two inmates were waiting for me. The person escorting me told me that *El Samurai* wanted to speak to me. He is the head of this jail. He stands above all other inmates, even the prison guards. *El Samurai* started the conversation as soon as I got there. 'Your uncle was here this afternoon. He told me they had extorted money and beaten you; is that right?' Next to the *Samurai* was standing the person who had asked me for money. I answered him, 'No, it was not quite like that. It was just what you have to do, when greeting new inmates, you know what I mean?' Satisfied with my answer, the *Samurai* invited me to change cells and finally repeated, 'I will do you a favour because of your uncle. Whatever problems you have, you can always come to me.'

On returning to my cell, I prayed to and thanked La Santa Muerte for sending me good people in spite of my having failed her. Honestly, I felt I had forgotten her. Many months had passed without my visiting her at my uncle's street altar. The one I worship is standing in my bedroom. I have made her an altar of different levels to be able to put all her things with her: her scapulars, tequilas, cigarettes, everything I give her. That is how she stands in our home. The only thing I ask her for is to give those neighbours what they wished on me. Because they really set me up.

Uncle David

At the police station, there were lawyers everywhere, yet none of them were any use. They could not get them released. I spent the whole day there, the following night and the next day too. I was just sitting there with my eyes wide open, watching my nephew's neighbours arrive in their big cars; because they are people with cars so big you cannot possibly fill them up. There they were, speaking with their lawyers and, soon after, with some other lawyers or judges. They entered one office and the next moment another. What does that mean? It means they know people. You can see the connections they have. While they were running around at ease in the

police station, we did not move from our seats. Why should I lie to you? So there I was, praying to God and *La Santita*. I just prayed and prayed: '*Madrecita*, please come and help us *Santísima Muerte*, you have always helped me *madrecita*, this time you cannot let me down. I do not know how, but please intervene in this mess.' Luckily, she soon brought us two good lawyers. A friend of my nephew knew a lawyer, who finally responded to our requests. He told us that he could not make the judge release my nephew but that the three others could go for 5,000 pesos each and another 5,000 to pay the lawyer. Luckily, Edgar has family. Those who didn't have 5,000 brought 3,000, and one who did not have 3,000 sold his television. In the end, we returned with the three girls but we could not prevent my nephew from being sent to jail.

The next day, I went to the jail with Paco. No uncles, aunts, nephews or nieces are allowed to enter. Only parents, spouses, siblings and children are allowed. I asked an old lady at the counter and she told me that I had to line up in the queue and, on entering the body searching zone, I should hand over 100 pesos to the prison guard. That was how we got in. It is a horrible place. I was looking around and saw what it was all about. If a young spouse of some inmate comes for a visit, she might dress up tarty, after all, she's coming to see her husband, but the one above tells you: 'Either you bring me your wife and I bend her over (*me la empilas*) or I'll beat the hell out of you.' She has to give in to those bastards to get her husband off.

My nephew introduced me to an inmate. He greeted me politely and told me, 'I am pleased to meet you. I belong to a different religion but I do respect [La Santa Muerte].' He left but came back and stopped me as I was getting ready to leave. 'Come with me, there is a gentleman who wants to give you a *madrina*.' They allowed me and Paco to cross to another yard, where there was some kind of shop. This gentleman was waiting for us there. 'So you want to give me a *madrina*?' I asked him. 'Will you take her to the altar?' he answered me. 'It is a fairly big one; how will you transport it?' he continued. 'Well, my son will carry her,' I answered, thinking she would be 70 cm tall! Then he took us to the storeroom. I turned pale on seeing her. This *madrina* was really big. I asked her, 'Do you want to come with me?' She looked positive. On leaving, I thanked this person again for giving me *la madrina*. He observed me quietly before asking me, 'Who is your nephew?' I told him. That was all.

The next morning, Edgar called me and said, 'You know the *Samurai* passed by my cell last night. He asked me how I was doing and offered me another cell.' Edgar also told me that many of the worst inmates had started to speak to him offering him protection. At least rough people, way above all those arseholes who are speaking to him now, are making sure that nobody hits him, stabs him … many things. I told him not to give thanks to me but to La Santa Muerte, who was the one connecting us with helpful people. I just pray to La Santa that the plaintiffs talk bullshit. The lawyer says that, with the evidence he has, Edgar should get off, but he cannot be sure because the judge might make a deal with the other family. Edgar's family is collecting together the 50,000 pesos which they will ask for his release and 20,000 to pay the lawyer. The lawyer told us that we should not give the judges any money. Instead, we should hand all the money over to him and he would pass it on. He has good connections and a lot of friends so he will ask one of his friends to sit down and speak with the judge. This friend knows the judge, you know, they can discuss it like old friends and perhaps he can soften things up. I say, if God is with us, let us prepare a good gift for this judge and bring him the 50,000. That is how I imagine we will finally reach the judge.

Providing security and insecurity

This case study shows that the way to obtain La Santa Muerte's influence is to adopt her into the family. Marina, Edgar and David all appeal to La Santa Muerte as a close friend or a kin-like member of their family to protect them. She 'lives' in the bedroom of their house, in the prison cells and is celebrated in the street outside Uncle David's house. The neighbour, on the contrary, was doing 'anti-family' things. She was suspected of buying black spells (probably also from La Santa Muerte) since she did not know how to take care of her own family, according to Marina. In this sense, taking care of the family becomes paramount to a successful saintly intervention and not doing so leads to wider failure.

For Edgar, Marina and David, there is something gendered in their relationship with this saint's figurines, as reflected in their use of familial and friendly terms (manita, nena, madrecita, madrina) as well as the more generic terms santa or santita. Edgar's failure to visit the 'mother figure' at David's street altar made La Santa Muerte angry and her punishment was severe. In contrast, humility and family reunification were rewarded by her beneficent intervention. They also insinuated that they would like La Santa Muerte to turn the neighbour's black spell back upon her. This shows that La Santa Muerte has the potential for producing both security and insecurity; the actual outcome depends on the intimacy she holds with the family. Female forbearance and anger are imperative in deciding how long and powerful her protection (or spell) will last and there is a latent risk that her help will transform into its shadowy side. On another occasion, Edgar framed this protection with the words: 'You have to know how to cohabit with her because, if you get along badly, it will also be bad for you.' The visits, celebrations and daily details are therefore crucial aspects of getting along with her. To keep relationships warm implies a constant commitment to reaffirming one's own and the other's presence in the family. It is, however, a tough social compromise. Edgar found it was hard to maintain his affectionate relationship with La Santa Muerte over time.

The family is the lifeline for the largely male population of prison inmates but maintaining this lifeline is a logistic and economic challenge for those outside. Mothers, wives, sisters and children have to work hard to keep the family together. They often turn into the inmates' heroines or saviours but they may also be their greatest disappointment. Social relations are especially tense in these families as commitment, love and loyalty are constantly questioned from both sides of the prison's bars. In these situations, La Santa Muerte becomes the perfect enhancement of this female force and lifts the ambiguities of affectionate family relations into a sacred universe full of human-like compromise and neglect. Her ambiguity as protector but also

potential castigator, heroine but also potential demon, peaceful but also violent (if neglected), makes her a powerful friend or kinswoman for inmates and their families. This ambiguity and permissive nature also makes her more human than other popular Catholic saints, despite the fact she has nominally never lived a human life. She is therefore also treated more humanly than most of the other saints.

There are other non-recognised folk saints who contain some of the same characteristics of ambiguity (Mal Verde, El Niño Fidelio's, San Simón). None of them, however, has been worshipped in Mexico City with the same enthusiasm. Nor does the veneration of them, to my knowledge, contain the same familial aspect. It is instead the worship of the recognised Saint Jude Thaddeus that comes closest to this aspect. I met many devotees of Saint Jude who treat their icons of him as a double-edged sword. He was also believed to be temperamental and capricious if not treated well or if promises to him went unfulfilled. I have insufficient ethnographic material, however, to confirm whether the worship contains the same familial intimacy; suffice it to say that the cult has grown parallel to the cult of La Santa Muerte in the same urban areas and among prisoners in Mexico City. I would therefore not be surprised if the cult of Saint Jude contained some of the same familial aspects although this would need to be documented in future studies.

Conclusion

The family story and the geo-mapping confirm the vital role folk religion plays in Mexico in relation to insecurity and violence. Historically popular Catholic saints have held important roles in periods of unrest (e.g. the Virgin of los Remedios and the Virgin of Guadalupe during the Mexican War of Independence and the widespread tradition of giving votive gifts to popular saints during the revolution). And yet the meanings of La Santa Muerte are distinct from Guadalupe and other more uniform folk saints insofar as she naturally embraces the moral ambiguity found flourishing both in the Mexican legal system and among citizens living on the fringes of modern Mexico. The family is where moral opposites can cohabit without breaking the precarious unity between good and evil for which she stands. It is here that she thrives and is committed to both protect and harm. As such La Santa Muerte becomes the iconic representation of the ambiguous Mexican family whereby the distinction between good and evil, formal and informal, has become problematic since people often find themselves forced to operate on both sides of the moral chasm.

The nature of this devotion therefore obliges us to reconsider the common distinction that is made between criminal and non-criminal devotees, a distinction whereby the cult is either demonised or beatified. This completely

overlooks the ambiguity that it involves, whereby both love and hate, loyalty and betrayal, are crucial to the exchanges that take between the devotees and La Santa Muerte. The familial nature of this exchange and the character of La Santa Muerte offers devotees a social platform of reciprocal exchanges with the divine, sidestepping 'normal' ways of exchanging with saints in popular Catholicism. Death as 'mother', 'sister', 'child', and 'godmother' holds the family together through both good and bad times, regardless of the reasons for asking for her help.

The implication of this 'family vision' is extensive for studies of religion and La Santa Muerte. The intimate familial aspect of the cult contests the studies of folk religion which concentrate on the instrumental dyadic exchange between devotee and saint (Chesnut). It also adds to the historical studies of folk religion that tend to focus more on the development of Mexican death cults and their icons than on the cultural dynamic between the icons and their worshippers (Lomnitz). And yet I find that it is the studies of deviances that gain most from the focus on family exchange. Anthropologists and sociologists studying radical insecurity have long been preoccupied with how 'dangerous youths' (gangs, crack houses, inmates, and so on) live in socially separate groups or in outright disorder in relation to punitive state practices. Most of those studied have been men. Yet this study shows that it is not necessarily a purely male thing to be imprisoned (and a female thing to be a devout Catholic). Incarceration is preferably faced by the entire, albeit often tensely-charged, family. It spurs both male and female members to act and make demands on the family according to their culturally gendered roles. In contrast to studies that emphasise the desertification of mass incarceration, this study thus finds that La Santa Muerte connects families across the social abyss of imprisonment. Mass incarceration has created a new cult in Mexico City.

Some might wonder what was inside the statue that was removed from the prison. Drugs or maybe money? On reflection, I think neither. I waited outside the prison and carried the statue when they left. It was made of plywood and very light, despite its size. I think this mysterious meeting with the Samurai had more to do with his and Uncle David's shared faith in the power of La Santa Muerte. They both wanted her to be happy with them, believing that the alternative could be disastrous. And it was the same for the rest of the family. They were all grateful that La Santa Muerte had reunited them and helped them face the extreme insecurity that Edgar's arrest had sparked. However, Edgar admitted that he had provoked her anger by failing to visit her. It was telling that the first thing he wanted to do on being released was to visit Uncle David's statue of her. And, later, when they felt certain that she was happy with them, she was called upon to make the neighbours pay for their misdeeds. And this, in a nutshell, is the point raised by this article.

The social relationships with La Santa Muerte, which are constantly unfolding within this figure of family unity and neglect, are what make La Santa Muerte more open to suggestions that would be impossible or inappropriate to ask of a 'normal' saint. In this regard, La Santa Muerte is as ambivalent as her devotees and the forces she helps to navigate. Since the 1990s, this ambiguity has become her principal strength.

Spanish and Portuguese abstracts

Spanish abstract. Este artículo explora el culto a la Santa Muerte a través de un geo-mapeo de los altares callejeros en la Ciudad de México seguido por un análisis etnográfico de las relaciones de los devotos con la santa. Yo encuentro que dicha santa ha ganado momento en las dos últimas décadas dentro de la rápidamente creciente población encarcelada. Al contrario de los estudios que enfatizan la desertificación del encarcelamiento masivo en varias partes, este estudio señala que La Santa Muerte conecta a las familias a través del abismo social de la prisión. Sugiero que las relaciones de tipo familiar que los devotos mantienen con la santa son cruciales para entender su éxito. En vez de ser una defensora sagrada unidimensional de criminales y policías ésta es adoptada por prisioneros, funcionarios carcelarios, la policía y sus familias como un "miembro familiar" caprichoso, estableciendo la misma ambivalencia de las fuerzas que ella ayuda a enfrentar.

Spanish keywords: La Santa Muerte, muerte, Estado penal, religión popular, geo-mapeo

Portuguese abstract. Este artigo explora a adoração à La Santa Muerte através de um mapeamento geográfico dos altares de rua da Cidade do México seguido de uma análise etnográfica das relações dos devotos com a santa. Constato que, nas últimas duas décadas, a santa ganhou espaço entre a cada vez maior população carcerária. Ao contrário de estudos que enfatizam a desertificação do aprisionamento em massa em outros lugares, esta pesquisa indica que La Santa Muerte conecta famílias que vivem no abismo social do encarceramento. Eu sugiro que as relações do tipo familiar que os devotos mantêm com a santa são cruciais para a compreensão de seu sucesso. Ao invés de ser uma defensora sagrada e unidimensional de criminosos e policiais, a santa é adorada por presos, funcionários dos presídios, policiais e suas famílias como um "membro familiar" inconstante, ganhando a mesma ambivalência que as forças que ela ajuda a nortear.

Portuguese keywords: La Santa Muerte, morte, estado penal, religião popular, mapeamento