

The Meaning of Death: Semiotic Approach to Analysis of Syncretic Processes in the Cult of «Santa Muerte»

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Abstract

The proposed paper discusses applicability of semiotic approach inspired by the work of Boris Uspieski to analysis of syncretic processes in the cult of Santa Muerte (Saint Death), a controversial folk saint. Although Santa Muerte enjoys growing popularity in Mexico and neighboring countries, the details concerning the cult have been hardly investigated. One of the reasons for Santa Muerte's popularity is the cult's extensive presence in mass media. The absence of a central institution that would establish the canon of beliefs as well as the individual character of the cult, leaves its iconography and ritual practice open to influences of various spiritual currents. Santa Muerte is associated with a number of other popular, formal and informal, Mexican saints, such as the Virgin of Guadalupe, Jesus Malverde or San Pascual, often through a direct identification, or by assuming wife/helper functions. Urban curers having Santa Muerte as their patron saint intermingle elements of folk Catholicism, Spiritualism, and indigenous healing methods in their ritual practice. In the Afro-Christian Santeria, Santa Muerte is identified with Yemayá, a goddess-saint connected with sea and maternity. In addition, the cult of Santa Muerte has been strongly influenced by commercial esoteric. There is also a clearly traceable impact of heavy metal aesthetics on the iconography of Santa Muerte, that in turn intensifies the popular, erroneous association of the cult with Satanism. Patterns of syncretic overlap (contamination) of figures from diverse belief systems, elaborated by Uspieski, enable us to organize phenomena associated with the cult of Santa Muerte as well as to create a comprehensible, dynamic model structuring the heterogeneous elements which emerge on the iconographic, lexical, ritual and narrative levels. The concept of myth as an ontological text along with the theory of semantic dominant are proven to be useful and complementary tools for the analysis of life-story interviews. The ethnographic data had been gathered during the author's fieldwork in Mexico and Guatemala between 2007 and 2008.

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. Among the multitude of phenomena covered by anthropology and religious studies, the synthetic processes are of the sort that calls for a semiotic analysis by its very nature. It is hard to imagine how to interpret and model phenomena such as image overlap of figures from different cultures, reciprocal translation of ritual elements into belief systems, or a change in the interpretation of an established symbol without using at least the very basic theoretical tools developed by semiotics.

1.2. In the following part I would like to share a few semiotic-inspired thoughts concerning the observations I made during my fieldwork in Mexico and Guatemala conducted in 2007 and 2008. One of the projects that was carried out concerned a seriously under-researched urban cult of Santa Muerte (Saint Death). Santa Muerte is a folk saint presented as a hooded skeleton holding a scythe (Fig. 1). The aim of this short article is to indicate some potential areas of interest for anthropology and religious studies where semiotic approach might contribute to a better understanding and a clearer display of the investigated phenomena.

1.3. The cult of Santa Muerte gains popularity not only in Mexico, but also in the neighboring countries of Guatemala, Salvador and the U.S.A. Apart from the extensive coverage by the popular press and a wide selection of publications for the devotees, for many years the cult has been overlooked by most anthropologist. Among the most important scholarly studies on the cult, there is only one book written by Perdigón Castañeda (2008), a photo catalogue with comments by Adeath and Kristensen (2007), articles by Flores Martos (2007) and Malvido (2005), along with a couple of unpublished dissertations and theses, with a monograph by Fragoso Lugo (2007).

1.4. Saint Death is one of the informal Mexican folk Saints. In its most popular version, the cult of Santa Muerte is but one of the forms of typical Mexican folk Catholicism. The Catholic patterns such as crossing oneself, saying rosaries, novena prayers and Mexican Birthday Songs dominate the paradigms of communication with Saint Death. Adoration of the image of Saint Death as well as the act of making apple, candy or tobacco offerings on the altar (Fig. 3), is an essential element of the cultic practice. There is also a number of urban curers having Santa Muerte as their patron saint. In comparison to the orthodox Catholic customs, the cult's rituals and prayers are usually performed to express a demand or a wish and often gravitate toward magical practices.

1.5. According to Mexican historians engaged in investigating the origins of the Saint Death image, the representation of a scythe-carrying skeleton as an object of adoration in Mexico and Guatemala is to be traced back to the skeletal figures such as Justo Juez, or Presagiadora, patrons of the 17th and 18th century Buena Muerte religious associations (*cofradías*) (Malvido 2005; Perdigón Castañeda 2008). Even more evident is the influence of the Guatemalan cult of skeletal folk saint San Pascual originating in the 17th century (Navarrette 1982). Nevertheless, the oldest documented signs of existence of the Santa Muerte belief system in its proper form,

related to the skeletal figure of, at least grammatically, feminine gender, and containing a set of appropriate rituals, symbolism and iconography trace back merely to the 1940s.

1.6. For a couple of decades the cult was performed individually or in small groups on a rather limited scale and went under the radar of public attention. In the 1990s, the cult started to rapidly develop in major urban areas, mostly in the capital. At the same time, Santa Muerte appeared for the first time in public discussion. An altar of Saint Death found during a police investigation in the house of Daniel Arizmendi López, a famous kidnapper and leader of an organized criminal group, made the folk saint an attractive subject for the popular press. The press discourse of the time declared Santa Muerte a patron saint of the criminal underworld. Journalists from *La Crónica* and *La Prensa*, along with a number of popular novelists, excelled in sensational stories on the allegedly satanic and perverse cult of death and human sacrifice. In 2001, Enriqueta Romero Romero established the first street altar of Saint Death opened for public view. The altar is located in the Tepito district of Mexico City. Monthly rosaries dedicated to Santa Muerte have been performed and pilgrimages from various parts of Mexico have begun to arrive ever since. Dozens of similar altars and shrines have emerged in various districts of the city and throughout the country (Fig. 4). The newspapers like *La Jornada* and *El País* have made an effort to present the cult in an unbiased way. It has been noticed that the cult gains popularity particularly among the lower strata of society: the hostesses, small tradesmen or workmen.

2. DEATH AS A SAINT

2.1. The ritual, the iconography and the belief system associated with the Santa Muerte figure borrow from most diverse sources. The most immediately recognizable one is the Christian language of representations and symbolism. As Flores Martos (2007) rightly points out, despite the common opinion the image of Santa Muerte has much more in common with the Virgin of Guadalupe than with Mictlantecuhtli and Mictlantecihuatl, the pre-Hispanic Aztec gods of death. On the visual level, the resemblance between Santa Muerte and the Virgin of Guadalupe becomes clear in the depictions of the former with a halo and dressed in a tunic (Fig. 1). A splendid example of how these two images overlap is the representation of Santa Muerte reproducing, in the form known as *piadosa*, the classic composition of Pietà, on which the Saint Death holds a human corpse and assumes the pose of the Virgin Mary holding Jesus Christ (Fig. 2). On the lexical level the isomorphism between these two figures is perceptible, for instance, in the frequent use of a phrase «cover us with your saint cloak» during the rosary prayers at the Tepito altar addressed to Santa Muerte. The phrase is characteristic of the prayers dedicated to the Virgin Mary. Similarly, one of the most frequently used epithets describing the skeletal saint, «our Mother», is also characteristic of the Virgin Mary (particularly the Virgin of Guadalupe in Mexican context). Both figures are associated with lunar symbolism. Although it does not constitute a common feature of the cult, there are instances of recoding these visual and lexical identifications directly to the belief system, so that Santa Muerte is sometimes believed to be identical with the Virgin of Guadalupe.

2.2. The abovementioned examples of multilevel syncretic overlap bear a strong resemblance to the patterns of «contamination», as described by Boris Uspienski in his comprehensive study of syncretic processes in the cult of Saint Nicolaus in Ruthenia (Uspienski 1985). Thus we might assume, that there are features of syncretic overlap which appear regardless of a particular cultural context.

2.3. It is not uncommon to directly associate Santa Muerte with other folk saints within the realm of the Mexican folk Catholicism. She is occasionally held as identical with San Pascual, as the wife of Jesús Malverde, or as Niño Fidencio's helper. The Mexican spiritualist tradition, closely related to folk healing practices and popular esoteric in the urban context, also remains in a circle of mutual influence with the cult of Saint Death. The most popular spiritualist current in Mexico — Marian Trinitarian Spiritualism — has developed an eclectic hierarchy of spiritual beings where *Hermana Blanca*, identified with Santa Muerte, holds a prominent position. Saint Death is identified with Yemayá in the area of the Veracruz port as the White Flower of the Universe (*Flor Blanca del Mundo*). Yemayá is one of the saints (*orishas*) of Santería — an Afro-Christian religious system originating from Cuba. In her incarnation as the White Flower of the Universe, Santa Muerte is depicted as a well-shaped, beautiful woman. The emphasis is put on her motherly, feminine aspects. A Yemayá statuette is also to be found on Saint Death's street altar of Tepito (Mexico City). The street at which the altar stands is marked with pictograms characteristic to Santería.

2.4. Santa Muerte has many names. Among the most common ones are: the Saint of Saints (*la Santísima*), the White Girl (*Niña Blanca*), and the Sister of Light (*Hermana de Luz*). She is often tenderly called one of a variety of diminutives such as the Skinny One (*Flaquita*).

2.5. The astonishing effortlessness with which the Santa Muerte cult absorbs countless elements of heterogenous visual codes, ritual grammar and belief systems is a result of many factors:

2.5.1. First of all, from the colonial times on, the religious panorama of Mexico has been shaped by the interaction of distinct belief systems and religious practices of various origins: indigenous, Christian and Afro-Christian, among others.

2.5.2. Secondly, the informal practices associated with Mexican folk Catholicism and the individual character of curers' healing performance result in a somewhat latitudinal approach towards interpretations of the Santa Muerte image.

2.5.3. What is more, despite ongoing attempts to unite the devotees of Saint Death, there is no single acclaimed institution gathering the cult members. As a result, there is no formal canon of laws or a precise liturgical scheme that would limit the variety of cult practices.

2.5.4. Additionally, human remains in Mesoamerican cultures had different symbolic meaning and had been inscribed to a system of beliefs and values separate from that of the European context. Even in Europe, a skeleton image generates distinct meanings, connotations

and preferred interpretations. Think *danse macabre* of Middle Ages and Baroque, Totenkopf — an SS uniform badge, or CD covers of numerous heavy metal music groups, to bring only a few random examples. The image of a human skeleton is loaded with different meanings in different cultural contexts but at the same time its various representations hold notable resemblance and it is so because they are modeled after a universal anatomic phenomenon. Thus, this striking and easily recognizable image stimulates the creation of links between distinct systems of meaning.

2.5.5. Another factor that influences the «semiotic voracity» of the Saint Death cult is its growing popularity in a modern (or post-modern, if you prefer) consumer society drowning in a flood of multimedia information. On one hand, it provides an easy (and superficial) access to the most diverse and exotic spiritual traditions and visual conventions associated with a skeletal image. On the other hand, the contemporary globalized culture bears a tendency toward transformation of each and every aspect of human life into a product which might be selected and optionally combined with other products in a custom way, similarly to a shopping mall merchandise. This feature is linked to the emergence of the so called «shopping-mall self» of the members of a consumer society and manifests itself through an extraordinary commercialization of the Santa Muerte cult and a flood of products designed and made especially for the devotees.

3. DEATH AS A PRODUCT

3.1. One could learn a lot about the commercial aspect of the cult through glossy magazines for Saint Death devotees. A glossy magazine has its own characteristic design. Regardless of the subject, e.g. fashion, music, cars or folk saints, its content is segmented and syntagmated according to the fixed rules of the logic of commerce and determinants of a particular magazine genre. The magazine's subject, regardless of its individual character, is inevitably transformed into a commercial product.

3.2. The most popular magazine for the devotees of Saint Death is *Devoción a la Santa Muerte*, issued by Mina Editores. Colorful covers of the magazine always present a Santa Muerte statuette in one of its countless varieties. Garish headlines like «New», «Extra», and «Gratis!!!» — a standard in yellow press, catch the eye of a passer-by. Also, there is usually a bonus such as a calendar, a poster or a paper figure of Santa Muerte included in the issue. The content includes photos of altars, letters from the readers to the editorial, ritual formulas (or should we say recipes?), explanations of the symbolic meaning of particular iconographical details and, of course, advertisements. The latter may help the researcher determine the magazine's target reader as well as the spiritual context in which the commercial aspects of the White Girl cult are placed. Thus, we come across advertisements where urban curers offer services like energetic cleansing (*limpias energéticas*), Tarot reading, magic practices, protecting against negative influences, or helping in the matters of health, love, money and other personal problems. Placed beside them are advertisements of horoscope hotlines, fortune-telling chat rooms

offering Tarot, Viking Runes and numerology reading, as well as Feng Shui accessories and tutorials. Products associated with Santa Muerte, such as DVDs with ritual instructions are combined with other merchandise, like candles, in bonus packs. There are also examples of other magazines promoting themselves in *Devoción...*, such as *Mundo esotérico* whose advertisements emphasize the affinity of Saint Death commercial image with the popular, eclectic esoteric pertaining to the currents of the New Age in a broad sense. A persistent emphasis on the alleged ancient origins of the spiritual tradition on sale—one of the characteristic features of the commercial esoteric—is manifested in the *Devoción...* magazine through cyclic articles on death cult in the pre-Hispanic Mexico.

3.3. The logic of commerce requires constant shifts in packaging of the same product, and the new, exotic labels are most welcome. In this aspect of the Santa Muerte cult, the freely adopted elements of diverse ritual and mythical languages become semantically reduced, recoded and uniformized in order to become a recognizable, ready-made, user-friendly product easily combined with the rest of available merchandise. The esoteric hybrid of Santa Muerte Tarot Cards might serve as an excellent example. Another symptom of the same process is the enormous and continually increasing range of mass-produced accessories exploiting Saint Death's image: statuettes, pendants, necklaces, t-shirts, even mobile phone wallpapers. This impetuous multiplication of forms and ritual-mythical multilingualism driven by the logic of commerce obviously impacts the language of representations, ritual grammar and mythology of the popular Saint Death cult.

3.4. Initially, the folk-Catholicism-influenced cult activities were performed on a modest altar, which in many cases consisted only of a small piece of paper with Santa Muerte's likeness and a few customary offerings. At present, the ritual is becoming increasingly extended and elaborated, relying on a multitude of purchasable accessories: statuettes, candles, lotions or powders adjusted to a specific ritual. The structure of the altar has also changed. As a rule, the altars made by urban curers and numerous devotees are composed of a multitude of various representations of Saint Death. On a mythological stratum the reception of Santa Muerte image is also changing. There is, for instance, an emphasis on the alleged pre-Hispanic roots of the cult, along with its supposed inter-religious universality, a feature which in earlier times, if appearing at all, had never been of much importance.

3.5. The foregoing considerations do not constitute by any means an exhaustive study of the issue but rather a starting point for further comprehensive and interdisciplinary investigations.



FIG. 1. A TRADITIONAL REPRESENTATION
OF SANTA MUERTE



FIG. 2. SANTA MUERTE AS *PIADOSA*



FIG. 3. CUSTOMARY OFFERINGS



FIG. 4. A PORTABLE STREET ALTAR IN MEXICO CITY

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