

Santa Muerte, Individual Psyche and Group Mentality

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Abstract

The paper inquires into the connections between the cult of Santa Muerte and the individual and collective needs which give rise to the practice. The phenomenon originating in Mexico is examined from a psychodynamic point of view but relevant sociological and anthropological factors are presented too. On an analytical level, the cult, bearing in mind the social phenomena of violence, instability and insecurity of the country in which it sinks its roots, reveals important analogies with the psychopathic dimension of the individual psyche and of group mentality. Parasitism as a relational style recalls a dysfunctional mother-child relationship, and this reflects the ways in which devotees relate to Santa Muerte. Final remarks consider the “psychological advantages” which the phenomenon seems to possess: as a “container of violence”, the cult allows devotees to cultivate the hope of escape from a violent and asphyxial universe.

Keywords

Santa Muerte, Psychopathy, Great Mother, Clastrum, Mexico

A list in alphabetical order: *Bonita, Chiquita, Comadre, Doña, Flaca, Flaquita, Hermana Blanca, Hermosa, Jefa, Madre, Matrona, Mi Amor, Niña Blanca, Patrona, Santísima Muerte, Santita, Señora, Señora de las sombras, Señora de Luz*. These are just a few of the names that ten million devotees have bestowed on *Santa Muerte*, a rapidly-expanding religious cult widely practiced in Mexico, Argentina and the Spanish-speaking areas of the United States, which hit the headlines thanks to one of its countless curious aspects: drug traffickers are among the cult’s most devoted followers.

As Fabrizio Lorusso points out, “starting from the late 90s, most of the shock news reports relating to the capture and killing of offenders, kidnappers, murderers and drug traffickers obsessively highlighted the existence of altars to the *Santísima* in their private homes or hideouts. There was a veritable witch-hunt, or rather a hunt for a single ‘witch’, to color news items which were in themselves already blacker than death”.¹

Of course, the cult of *Santa Muerte*, which is of uncertain and controversial origin,² is not the exclusive prerogative of the *narcos*, despite the fact that it has become known, in Europe in particular, for this aspect. It concerns many levels of Mexican society, not only the most humble and marginal, the lower classes and outcasts, but also the middle classes.

The endemic need of the media circus to turn the news into a show, however, meant that the noir fiction undertones of the phenomenon were immediately capitalized on and given ample space: documentaries, interviews and talk-shows mushroomed, reintroducing into the global village the *τόποι* which distinguish the cult.

It is no accident that *Santa Muerte* has spread starting from Mexico, the country where García Márquez was living when he created his “sons” Aureliano Buendía, Remedios and the imaginary land of Macondo,³ helping to lay the foundations of magic realism where traditionally everyday life becomes hybridized with highly evocative phenomena, apotropaic acts, magically-inspired thinking and superstition.

But Mexico is also a land of death: 60,000 killings in six years in the drug trade wars.⁴ It is also

1F. Lorusso, *Santa Muerte*, Stampa Alternativa, Viterbo 2013, p. 60.

2According to Lorusso (*ibid.*, p. 77) among the hypotheses relating to the cult’s origins, three distinct influences can be recognized which, coming together, have contributed to the syncretic construction of *Santa Muerte*: the first, from the *Yoruba* people from Africa via the American transmigrations of *santería*, *palo mayombe* and *voodoo*; the second mixing the Catholic tradition of All Souls’ Day reinterpreted in the light of pre-Colombian cults and indigenous *mestizo* folklore; the third pertaining to the medieval European baroque heritage brought in by the colonizers.

3G. García Márquez, *Cent’anni di Solitudine* (1967), Mondadori, Milano 1988.

4*Ibid.*, p. 95.

where the city of Ciudad Juárez, as Silvia Giletti⁵ notes, for years held the world record for homicides, of which over 500 were cases of femicide documented since 1993, and where thousands of cases of *desaparecidas* are still waiting to be solved.

The last twenty years in the country have been marked by violent crises caused by social, financial, political and even natural factors (the devastating earthquake of 1985), such as to reaffirm forcefully the association between life and uncertainty. For Mexico, the pacts with the devil of von Chamisso's character Peter Schlemihl⁶ or of Faust⁷ do not hold. Neither does Ariès's masterful reading⁸ of the effacement of death in the West bear scrutiny: right in the era of the collective excision of death, here emerges its cult with even greater emphasis.

The inclination to a relationship with death in Mexico, as well as being an everyday fact, represents a traditional cultural element: in fact, the *Día de Muertos*, with two days' public holiday, has been declared a "Masterpiece of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity" by Unesco.

On the sociological level, the cult of *Santa Muerte*, without being revolutionary or affirming new truths, tries to offer what its devotees need: that their affairs may thrive, that their affections may be reciprocated, that they might not have to have too many dealings with doctors. Rather than transcendent eternal salvation, they make do with survival day by day. To render contemporary the thoughts of Robert Hertz,⁹ such a collective representation of death may strengthen social cohesion, facilitating the repair of the social fabric after the many hurts it has suffered.

But even more than its collective function, it is the intense personalization of the relationship between individual and *Santísima Muerte* which highlights another original aspect of the cult and enables us to detect its protective worth. Whereas in the revealed religions, the screen reflecting the individual's projection is already to a greater extent occupied and regulated by the theological contents of the religions themselves, in the case of the relationship with *Santa Muerte* this does not occur: the idea of the deity, given the substantive absence of a collectively-codified liturgical apparatus, becomes an *ad personam* solipsistic container of the individual's fantasies and anguish, in addition, of course, to carrying out its function of choice as answering to her/his spiritual needs.

Favored by the dissemination of pictures and information via the Internet, recent years have seen an increase both in the transpersonal elements of the cult (such as the wafting of the smoke of *puros*, or Cuban cigars, onto the *Flaca*, a custom known as "*purear*") as well as those elements of individual differentiation, which make a complete description of the infinite variety of practices associated with *Santa Muerte*, which in turn are bolstered by the growing religious and cultural syncretism from which they derive, practically unattainable. Indeed, on house altars used for supplication, it is not uncommon to find other pre-Colombian or Catholic saints, Hindu deities and photographs of secular subjects, in turn invested with personal projections.

The vulgate appearance of *Santa Muerte* sees her robed in a long tunic which reveals only a skull and the bones of the hands and feet. The hands usually bear a globe, a scythe and a set of scales, symbolizing limitlessness, the ability to bring life to an end – the scythe harvests wheat – and equilibrium respectively. The tunic has a variety of colors which are chosen by the devotee on the basis of the type of request the *Flaquita* is expected to attend to: green for justice, yellow for money, red for love, to name just a few.

The acts of supplication to *Santa Muerte* may consequently concern both possible "white" beneficial requests as well as "black" curses, depending on the *desiderata*.

The ritual, with its miraculous and supernatural characteristics, calls for a tribute, or *manda*, to be offered to the *Niña Blanca* in the form of oblations, actions, prayers, offers in kind, promises of personal improvement and, in all likelihood, sacrifices, for the supplication to be granted.

5S. Giletti Benso, *I vortici della Violenza*, in S. Giletti Benso and L. Silvestri (edited by), *Ciudad Juárez*, Franco Angeli, Milano 2007, p. 9.

6A. von Chamisso, *La Prodigiosa Storia di Peter Schlemihl* (1814), in AA. VV., *Essere Due*, Einaudi, Torino 2006.

7J.W. Goethe, *Faust* (1808), Rizzoli, Milano 2005.

8Ph. Ariès, *Storia della Morte in Occidente* (1975), Rizzoli, Milano 1998.

9R. Hertz, *Sulla Rappresentazione Collettiva della Morte* (1907), Savelli, Roma 1978.

As Diana Washington Valdez¹⁰ recalls, the idea of sacrifice is set deep in Mexican culture. The Spanish conquest imposed a variation in the earlier pagan sacrificial cults, introducing the model of Christ's sacrifice, the real "*difference between Christianity and paganism*".¹¹ In Catholic doctrine, it lives again ritually in the Eucharist, so that it is no longer human beings who have to sacrifice themselves, but the divinity itself which intercedes to obtain divine favor. Insofar as it is never mentioned explicitly, in that official "evidence" is lacking, it is possible to make out covertly in the author's essay a hypothesis of correlation between the victims of femicide and sacrificial offering to *Santa Muerte*, a sacrifice which, it must be remembered, always has the aim of obtaining and maintaining power.

Continuing with the analysis of the novel elements present in *Santa Muerte* phenomenology, mention must be made of the absence of a specific hagiography which normally exists for other Saints, since the *Bonita*, never having existed historically, combines within herself the abstract conceptual and noumenal dimension proper to an absolute deity with the empirical, immanent, chthonic force of death.

Who could doubt her power?

The resultant synthesis generates in the collective imaginary a hypostasis recalling the archetype of the Great Mother as perceived in her double polarity: *Señora de las sombras* and *Señora de Luz*.

The general opinion among adherents of the cult is that the *Señora de las sombras* is unreservedly vindictive towards those who do not respect the commitments they undertake or show complete devotion to her cult, non-binding though the "exclusiveness of the relationship" might be.

The castrating, annihilating scythe is an explicit warning, capable of interrupting life-bearing fertility at any moment and transforming it into its opposite; a veritable "mother of death", a latter-day *Kali* whom it would be expedient not to defy, but rather whose requests to indulge, requests which in turn are the outcome of processes of projective identification.

On the psycho-dynamic level, the cult of *Santa Muerte* enables us to elaborate a further consideration, in view of the fact that the society in which the cult is rooted – a society characterized, as has already been said, by significant levels of instability, violence and insecurity for which the *narcos* seem to represent the epiphenomenon – shows notable analogies with the *psychopathic* dimension of the individual psyche and group mentality. It may therefore be useful, for a greater understanding of the cult, to undertake a concise exploration of the area of psychopathology known as "psychopathy", a broad, all-encompassing diagnostic category, long held to be within the scope of forensic psychiatry and the judiciary, rather than clinical psychiatry or dynamic psychology. Psychopathy is, in fact, undoubtedly most frequently linked to the world of criminality, inside which, on a macroscopic level, its sociopathic hallmark in particular emerges; but it is important to remember, at least incidentally, that a psychopathic characterization, structured and pervasive to a greater or lesser extent, can take shape also in completely different scenarios, from entire institutions traditionally understood as such (barracks, psychiatric hospitals, prisons) to political and social institutions in the widest sense.

The starting point for this brief digression into the universe of psychopathy, within which at least one important strand of the Mexican cult seems to sink its roots, originates in the traditional definition of psychopathy as "madness without delusion", as if to suggest a manner of psychic suffering which seemingly does not affect thought, and which appears to take shape rather in behavior: a disturbed and disturbing way of acting is at the center of the psychic scene.

What are its characteristic traits?

The first is a manner of interacting with others marked by exploitative parasitic and utilitarian tendencies: the other is not perceived as an autonomous relational object whose space is to be respected, but tends rather to be considered a "thing" which can provide the fulfillment of primary needs (such is the dialectic model, for example, which establishes itself in the cult between devotee

¹⁰D. Washington Valdez, *La Cultura del Sacrificio*, in S. Giletti Benso and L. Silvestri (edited by), *Ciudad Juárez*, Franco Angeli, Milano 2007.

¹¹L. Feuerbach, *L'Essenza del Cristianesimo* (1841), Laterza, Roma-Bari 1997, p. 166.

and *Santa Muerte*). On the social level, it may be the final purchaser of drugs in the case of the drug trade, or the woman radically objectified by the stalker, not so much the source of libidinal gratification as the container into which to evacuate hate and violence. Even seemingly solid relationships, such as the gregarious camaraderie found in criminal bands – take, for example, the drug traffickers’ Cartels such as the *Zetas* or the *Mara Salvatrucha* – obey primitive emotive logic: the other in this case exists only within the role defined by prior membership of the group, and not as an individual. From this derives as a predictable consequence a profoundly amoral aspect, if one excludes a certain pseudo-morality of the group which may apply to a criminal gang or, in a different example, clearly *mutatis mutandis*, certain extremist fringes of organized supporters in football stadiums: in other words, codified membership norms substitute an authentic ethical dimension.

A further indicator is also descended from parasitism as a relational style: a tendency towards addiction: from psychoactive substances to gambling, from the compulsive sexual behavior of Don Juanism to power and money experienced as a drug. We say “descend”, but to be more exact, or rather, to be exact from a psycho-analytical point of view, we come up against the relational style just described. It is not just the interpersonal relationships, in fact, which are marked by utilitarian exploitation, but more generally it can be said that it is the overall “being-in-the-world” psychopathy which is constantly marked by an inauthenticity in relationships: everything (people, things, behavior) becomes in the end an indistinct mass with which to fill, in bulimic and circular fashion, an enigmatic and disquieting interior void.

Precisely this laborious toxicomaniac-like movement may conceal, as background noise, yet another typifying element: the deep-seated passivity of the psychopathic individual or group (or of the psychotic part of the personality within the individual mind). There is, in fact, no originality of thought within this psychic dimension, defined by the uncritical and stereotypical sharing of behavior models and ideals. It is therefore untrue that, in psychopathy, thought disorders do not exist: thought, certainly not grossly altered in form – as does occur, for example, in many schizophrenic contexts – is nevertheless a characteristic “non-thinking” thought, fundamentally incapable of symbolic activity and therefore radically “concrete”. It is inevitable, therefore, that on the one hand *acting* often takes the place of *thinking*, which is essentially fragile and inadequate, and that on the other, putting oneself in the hands of a leader is a frequent strategy, a leader on whom to depend passively and uncritically up to the extreme of *participation mystique*, as Lévy-Bruhl¹² puts it, whether he is a living individual or significant character from one’s biographical or historical past, or it is an icon or a symbol which is involved.

This constellation of elements is rooted, abandoning the phenomenological plane, in a highly distinctive mental universe, to describe which we must keep in mind a model of mother-child relationship characterized not by love and a receptiveness to reciprocal growth, but rather by spoliation and use of the other. A mother who beats her child is an example, unfortunately by no means rare, of a relationship in which the child is used as a container of brutal maternal evacuative intrusions, but on the opposite front also a mother who does not allow her child to become autonomous is using her/him as a personal object: in such situations the mental container, which in the mother-child relationship should emerge and grow, becomes more similar, on a metaphorical level, to a garbage dump than the “house of thought” it should be. It is therefore quite understandable how Donald Meltzer,¹³ in his characteristic and sometimes baroque Kleinian dialect, refers to the psychopathic dimension talking about life in the *mother’s rectum*, the *claustrum*, to his way of seeing, *par excellence*, gemmated by a mother-child relationship characterized by recurring pervasive intrusive identifications: *claustrum* as place of spoliation, refusal, evacuation, exile, in which “there is only one value: survival”.¹⁴ In this abandonic and devitalized place, the presence stands out of a primitive and tyrannical superego, which we might describe (with a more usable image than the one employed in the Kleinian lexis) as a paternal object, dominated by a logic based

12L. Lévy-Bruhl, *La Mentalità Primitiva* (1922), Einaudi, Torino 1966.

13D. Meltzer, *The Claustrum: An Investigation of Claustrophobic Phenomena* (1992), Perthshire: Clunie Press

14*Ibid.*, p. 91.

on rules and verticality, unchecked by a vital maternal object, which appears fundamentally absent: put in other terms, it is the world of Creon without Antigone. In this mental dimension, the memory of more vital states, never completely absent, resonate as a “Paradise Lost”: “*life in the womb and the life of intimate relationships (to be breast-fed at their root), with its pleasures of thought and growth of emotive meaning through learning from experience*”,¹⁵ torment by their absence the exile in this claustrophobic valley of tears.

Meltzer then notes: “In essence we are dealing with the region of psychic reality where the atmosphere of sadism is pervasive and the hierarchic structure of tyranny and submission forebodes violence”,¹⁶ and again: “it is a region of satanic religion, ruled by the great fecal penis, it is the world of Orwell’s ‘Big Brother’.¹⁷ It is thus a world of groups, or rather tribes, of Bion’s Basic Assumption Groups,¹⁸ a world of presumption rather than thought, where right means either the law or precedent, where to be genuinely different means to be detected as an intruder by the great ‘Jew Detector’”.¹⁹

The cult of *Santa Muerte*, seen in the polarity of the Negative Great Mother, would thus seem to be deeply rooted in the mental universe just described, representing a surprising, hybrid amalgam of the two psychic “objects” which dominate the *claustrum*: an undisputed archaic and sadistic superego and the “dead mother”, the latter understood as the absence of the mother’s vital mental qualities, particularly her capacity for “reverie”, which, put very briefly, is her ability to sense the needs of the newborn child, restoring to it the emotive climate decontaminated, as it were, of primitive anguish.

Santa Muerte, indeed, has the absolute power of the archaic superego, the enigmatic arbiter of life and death, to be blandished with adequate sacrifices to prevent her from unleashing her anger with its unpredictable consequences. Besides, the obvious iconic reference to the Virgin Mary, a chthonic and literally deathly version of whom she represents, is the plastic encapsulation of the “dead mother”, a mother “without milk” and devitalized, symbolically linked more with the Parcae or the Erinyes than with Christian iconography. Moreover, the connection to the former appears reformulated at a more primitive level, inasmuch as these deities are part of a polytheistic universe which gives voice to a complex and elaborate psychic panorama, whereas *Santa Muerte* is a solitary deity who enjoys uncontested dominion over an essentially non-differentiated and individualistic psychic world.

Also the quality of the devotee’s relationship with the *Señora de las sombras* appears saturated with the claustrophobic atmosphere just described. As previously noted, an actual *ἐκκλησία* does not exist, and the relationship between each devotee and *Santa Muerte* is direct, with no mediation by a minister of the cult of any sort, and the individual, comparable to the *clientes* queuing up in the waiting room of the local bigwig with their requests for prebends (benefices *sine cura animarum*) and favors. In effect, this type of attitude towards the divine can be found to a greater or lesser degree in every religion, although often moderated by the latter’s collective and organized dimension which limits any maverick drift, as well as by a greater and more harmonious symbolic richness in the divine image, elements which appear all but absent in the cult of *Santa Muerte*.

The picture, then, is of a relationship with the divine literally dependent on patronage rather than on religious motivations, in all likelihood striving to see realized requests for power (success, wealth, victory over one’s enemies, etc.), understood, however, not only as the realization of wishes expressed verbally, of a more or less infantile nature, but also, on a deeper level, as a search for a way out of the asphyxial universe of the *claustrum*, trying to conjure up the sorely missed “Paradise Lost” (the wealth of the *narcos*, at least as far as we are able to ascertain from the media, is a glaringly obvious example): a “Paradise Lost”, however, which even when attained with the riches

¹⁵*Ibid.*, p. 122.

¹⁶*Ibid.*, p. 91.

¹⁷G. Orwell, *1984* (1948), Mondadori, Milano 1983.

¹⁸W.R. Bion, *Apprendere dall’Esperienza* (1962), Armando, Roma 2009.

¹⁹*Ibid.*, pp. 91-92.

which permit a life of magnificence, clearly cannot truly constitute a vital way out. In this regard, Meltzer again comes to our aid when, commenting on the search for a life of luxury as antidote for desperation, notes: “*It comes as no surprise that luxury hotels have windows which can be opened only a few inches*”.²⁰ The *narcos*’ lives, with their sumptuous villas which at one and the same time are bunkers, seem to exemplify this vividly.

We can conclude these observations pausing to consider the psychological advantages that the cult of *Santa Muerte* seems to possess. Firstly, as an icon which enables a psychic problem to be exteriorized, it attenuates the related tension within an individual, and the correlated social consequences. It is likely, in fact, that the cult of *Santa Muerte* is able to hold the violence in check, without which it might be even greater than what it is at present.

Secondly, and to conclude, the cult of the *Señora de Luz* allows the illusion to be maintained of a possible way out of that asphyxial and abandonic universe which it expresses with extreme plasticity. This might also have the positive consequence of containing, at least to a certain extent, the explosive potentiality of the society in which it is practiced: in this sense, in accordance with the thinking of Marx, and with no irony intended with respect to the production and commerce of the drug in that society, it is a veritable “opiate” of the people.

20 D. Meltzer, *Clastrum. Uno studio dei fenomeni claustrofobici*, op. cit., p. 97.