

– *Devoted to Death: Santa Muerte, the Skeleton Saint*, by R. Andrew Chesnut, Oxford University Press, 2012.

Since the early 2000s, the Santa Muerte has gained much visibility in marketplaces and yerberías (stands for healing and magic) in Mexico. Firstly an urban cult, the Santa Muerte quickly spread to the countryside and, through the Mexican diaspora, beyond the national boundaries. Nowadays Santa Muerte is worshiped in Central America, the United States, Canada and Spain. One can even see her image, a skeleton travestied as a Virgin Mary, in tattoo parlours in Amsterdam.

The devotion to Santa Muerte is controversial. In principle, it venerates death and is closely related to the underworld of criminality. Recently, the Mexican government has systematically destroyed Santa Muerte shrines in many towns including Matamoros, Tijuana and Nuevo Laredo at the Mexico/US border, where the small temples are quickly rebuilt or moved to different locations. The hierarchy of the Catholic church in Mexico has depicted devotion as an anti-religion promoting anti-values such as death, violence and the lifestyle of drug-traffickers. The upper classes in Mexico are amazed and sometimes disgusted by the growing visibility of Santa Muerte in the public space.

At the dawn of the twenty-first century Santa Muerte emerged 'from the darkness', and became a prominent feature in Mexico's urban culture. The cult has found fertile soil in marketplaces and squares, and in chapels and itinerant shrines built firstly in Central and Northern Mexico. As churches and paraphernalia shops mushroom all across Mexico, Santa Muerte has become a cultural icon and its criminal flare is fading away. How could an underground image become a cultural icon? Within this context both complex and provoking, Andrew Chesnut seeks to make a contribution to the study of this emerging form of popular religiosity.

The book is an introductory study to the devotion of Santa Muerte, and is useful for those who are just getting acquainted with the academic sources and material available on the Internet. The publication is organized in six chapters, each symbolizing the candles that believers light when asking favours to Santa Muerte; chapter one presents a historical background; the second focuses on the rituality of the cult; chapter three discusses the deathly powers of Santa Muerte; the fourth chapter elaborates on love and passion in the cult; financial and material abundance are the main topic of chapter five; and chapter six looks at the linkages between killings and justice in the devotion. Given the absence of a theoretical framework and minuscule bibliography consulted, the book works as a long journalistic article, literary essay or a diary. In addition, a number of problems regarding the context and methodology of the study and the overarching argument of the manuscript cast a shadow over the potential of the book.

Lévi-Strauss<sup>1</sup> reminds us that myths do not have a clear origin: they result from collective imagination and are selectively based on historical facts. In this sense, Santa Muerte is not an exception, and believers place this cult in a historical continuum that provides some depth: it 'traces back' to the representation of death and the underworld of the Olmecs, and to the ancient Mexica culture in Tenochtitlán, where human skulls had a ritual and decorative function. Claims of an early cult of death in colonial Mexico have also been made. Chesnut reproduces these perspectives, placing the Santa Muerte devotion in a linear development dating back to pre-Hispanic cultures. Undoubtedly, the author is both intrigued and seduced by the elusive character of the Santa Muerte, but a clear distinction between the cult as a belief and as a socio-historical object is paramount.

Regarding the methodology, the reader wonders about the techniques and system behind the information collected. Vague and undocumented statements are made with no clear sources: '5 per cent of the Mexican population of 100 million would be devotees of Saint Death' (p. 9); 'the majority of devotees are taxi drivers, prostitutes, streets vendors, housewives, and

criminals' (p. 12); 'of the hundreds of Santa Muertistas whom I've interviewed and chatted...' (p. 142). From the point of view of an anthropologist, the book has the ambition to rely on ethnographic methods, particularly interviews with devotees, paraphernalia shop owners, and altar keepers like Doña Queta in Tepito, Mexico City. Yet, the data is scattered and the reader feels a times lost in the unordered accounts and fragments of interviews, which flattens the material and makes it difficult to assess when the informant or the writer is speaking. In-depth interviews, even a life-story of Doña Queta, who is an eloquent and generous speaker herself, and more detailed material would have been appreciated here. Much has to be explained about the circuits through which the belief spreads, and the way it blends into different geographical and social settings.

The chapters continuously switch among topics and chronological lines; that makes it difficult to find a central argument across the book. Some additional editing should have been used, especially to avoid repetitions. All in all, the book echoes much of the perspective and information already available in newspaper articles, blogs and documentaries circulating in the Internet since the early 2000s, which to a certain extent glamorize the devotion. But the Santa Muerte involves more than a ('powerful') miracle worker. Central questions remain open: to what extent is Santa Muerte an expression of narcocultura? If so, how could the 'criminal' saint come out in the open? And what does this tell about a context of collapsing institutions and expanding violence in present-day Mexico? Further research is necessary to unpack the symbolism of Santa Muerte both as a religious icon and as a cultural phenomenon, and the way devotees switch among systems of belief, combining both dominant and emerging expressions.

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**Note**

1. Lévi-Strauss, Claude (2001 [1978]), *Myth and meaning*, London: Routledge.