

## Introduction

From the city of San Luis Potosí, we headed north on federal Highway 57, a key artery that connects Mexico City with major northeastern industrial cities all the way to Piedras Negras on the Mexico–US border. After approximately 100 kilometres, my friend and I arrived at the junction with Highway 80, which runs eastwards towards the Gulf of Mexico. Popularly known as El Huizache, the junction is a typical highway microcosm on northern Mexico’s desertic highlands that caters to a fleeting population. With a gas station, car repair shops, restaurants, and a few grocery stores, it is a place where travellers take a break from their long drives. For years, this part of the highway has attracted criminals involved in carjacking and cargo theft. Coming from southern Mexico and the Pacific coast, drugs pass through here on their way to US consumers. El Huizache has a reputation of being unsafe. Although in 2021 a detachment of the National Guard was stationed here, many travellers feel they need additional protection.

In the surroundings of the junction, one finds three Santa Muerte – Saint Death – shrines. One is small and scruffy with dried up flowers and bird droppings. Another is a small-scale rectangular green structure with bright red inner walls. A well-kept narrow corridor has burning candles, paper flowers, Santa Muerte posters, and a niche with four effigies of the saint. On the western side of Highway 57, the third shrine is a maroon ‘capilla de la santa-muerte’ [*sic*]. Concrete steps lead towards an open, white-painted cast iron gate. With its 4-by-6 metre surface and approximately 3.5 metres height, this is an impressive shrine. It is about fifteen metres from the main road. Day and night cars and trucks whiz by at high speed. It is noisy and dusty. Every so often, cars and trucks stop. Visitors make their way to the shrine, usually after buying a candle or something else in the adjoining shop-restaurant. At one point, a middle-aged man parks his automobile near the shrine. Dressed in shorts and a T-shirt, sporting tattooed arms and legs, the man kneels in front of the altar and prays silently. Shortly afterwards, a young woman and her daughter visit the chapel. The daughter leaves some coins. And so it goes on.

Two prayer stools face the main altar, which consists of a stepped platform that has a massive seated black skeletal Santa Muerte statue at the centre. She holds a globe in her left hand and a scythe in her right hand. The lower steps hold numerous different-sized effigies all dressed in cloth habits. Together they form an extraordinarily colourful bunch. Offerings like candles and flowers fill the lowest step. A large arch of pink and purple crepe paper encircles the entirety. Large windows and a dome in the ceiling emphasize the shrine’s unusual spaciousness (Figure 1).



**Figure 1** Altar in Capilla de la Santa Muerte, El Huizache junction, San Luis Potosí. Photo by author.

Several human-sized dressed statues line the yellow inner walls, which are covered with large, framed Santa Muerte posters. Some have photographs stuck on them of the devotees requesting Santa Muerte's protection. Unsurprisingly, quite a few are truck drivers, who spend weeks on the road away from loved ones, living on junk food and pills, risking accidents, robberies, or worse. A spectacular example of a tailor-made poster contains a Santa Muerte image on top of which a cut-out photograph of a chauffeur in front of his double truck is glued. The skeletal saint wears a white robe, her grisly skull, surrounded by an aureole, looks down on the driver. Underneath the image is a prayer. The

poster’s skillful composition conveys both an intimidating threat and an over-  
 powering source of protection (Figure 2).

Elsewhere in the shrine is a wooden display case full of small passport  
 pictures and IDs, and photographs of more truck drivers, couples, families,  
 and children. At the bottom of the display case are some Santa Muerte figurines,  
 and a replica skull open at the top, in which someone has put out a cigarette.



**Figure 2** Santa Muerte poster, Capilla de la Santa Muerte, El Huizache junction,  
 San Luis Potosí. Photo by author.

Only twenty-five years ago it would have been highly unlikely to encounter such a public shrine dedicated to Santa Muerte. Today, a neat signpost on Highway 57 informs travellers of the approaching shrine. Altars and shrines can be found across the country and beyond. A wide variety of devotional accoutrements – figurines, lotions, bracelets – are for sale in popular markets, where people buy vegetables, meat, get haircuts, eat lunch, and find products for their physical and spiritual well-being. Devotees gather at street rosaries (devotional rituals), processions, and pilgrimages, and are active on social media. In other words, over a relatively brief period Santa Muerte iconography and devotion gained a visible presence in Mexico’s religious and cultural landscape.

Santa Muerte devotion has been around since before 2000, but without its current public exposure and with different devotional practices. Compared to its current exuberance, during most of the twentieth century the cult existed in an elementary form, above all concealed in private spaces. It therefore seems justifiable to speak of a new religious movement, even though it is more a broad, diverse, and changing community of congregations than a single movement. This does not mean it lacks significant social and political components. Devotees and scholars alike frequently use the nomenclature of cult (‘culto’ in Spanish) rather than church, community, or, much less, movement. I use the word cult in a descriptive sense as ‘a community loosely cohered by belief in a particular folk saint’, which avoids the negative common usage of the term in English, for which Spanish speakers would rather use the term ‘secta’ (Graziano 2007: ix). While relatively new in its current form, and less a movement than a cult, the Santa Muerte phenomenon is unquestionably religious: devotees speak of their beliefs, altars, rituals, and their allegiance to the saint (and God) with passion and faith. In general, I understand the cult as an idiosyncratic yet deeply embedded manifestation of Mexican repertoires of popular religiosity.

For many, however, this is implausible: the cult’s uncommon fearsome skeletal iconography is seen as antithetical to mainstream religious experiences. Over the years, I have observed a range of attitudes towards the cult and my research: from raising eyebrows, disbelief, and warnings not to get into trouble to the outright condemnation of the cult as delusion, idolatry, and satanism. The cult’s increasing public presence should therefore not be taken as an unequivocal sign of normalization. Although attitudes have shifted, it remains controversial and stigmatized. The Catholic Church has characterized it as a dangerous aberration. Since the beginning of the twenty-first century, the increasingly visible manifestations of Santa Muerte devotion attracted the attention of the mainstream media. Especially during the first decade of the 2000s, documentaries and journalistic accounts portrayed the cult and its members as associated

with crime, drug trafficking, and violence. Hollywood movies and series soon picked up on the trope. On Santa Muerte social media pages people leave messages of hell and damnation.

In this Element, I propose to deconstruct mainstream views of Santa Muerte devotion by privileging the voices, experiences, and practices of devotees themselves that continue to be only superficially known. I argue that, counter-intuitively but quintessentially, Santa Muerte devotion is about securing a good life. I will show how despite its distinctive features it is profoundly shaped by Mexico's religious and cultural history. Santa Muerte material culture, theology, and devotional practices echo rituals performed for canonized Catholic saints, including the Virgin of Guadalupe. Based on first-hand ethnographical field-work conducted since 2014, as well as an in-depth examination of existing scholarly work, this Element presents a comprehensive overview and analysis of Santa Muerte devotion. While it can be found in the United States and elsewhere, the focus of this Element is on Santa Muerte devotion in Mexico.

### Background and Context

Since the early 2000s, the cult has become more visible, grown numerically, and expanded geographically. Assessing the number of devotees is notably difficult. The cult has no membership registration or entry requirements. While most scholars have accepted that reliable quantitative data about the cult are unavailable, others have resorted to disputable indicators of interested cult leaders to gauge the number of devotees. In 2012, extrapolating from the estimated sales of votive candles and other devotional accoutrements – a statistically hazardous task – the religion scholar Andrew Chesnut calculated the number of Santa Muerte devotees at five million (2012: 8–9). Only a few years later, in 2015, the cult had grown ‘astronomically’ arriving at ten to twelve million devotees in Mexico, Central America, and the United States (McNearney 2015). Adrián Yllescas (2023: 188) has concluded that these claims lack methodological rigor, and instead pointed at anthropologist Regnar Kristensen's (2015) painstaking 2008 census of Mexico City street altars that arrived at approximately 30,000 devotees praying monthly at public shrines. Assuming that this represents one-third of all devotees in the city – many only worship in their homes or in prison – and that the number of devotees has doubled in ten years (as Chesnut suggests), we arrive at around 200,000 in the Mexico City metropolitan area around 2018. Since nearly one-fifth of the country's population lives in the greater Mexico City area – the cult's heartland – it seems reasonable to estimate the total number of devotees at one million in Mexico at the time. While it has been argued that the number of devotees at public gatherings was decreasing by the



end of the 2010s, a possible post-Covid rise would currently render at most 1.25 million devotees (Kristensen 2019: 151).

There is compelling evidence of the cult's internationalization. Research has documented altars and congregations from Los Angeles to New York (Graf 2023; Jiménez 2019; Müller 2021). As in Mexico, reliable statistics don't exist. However, ethnographic research provides useful clues, particularly about Los Angeles, arguably the most important centre of Santa Muerte devotion outside Mexico (Graf 2023: 28). It has shown that compared to Mexico numbers are very modest. While the busiest shrine in Los Angeles is visited on workdays by devotees for individual prayers, services provided on Sundays attracted around 25 participants, and around 100 attended the most important annual fiesta (Graf 2023: 91). Another shrine offers weekend services for 5–20 people, and another has a successful digital platform with 80,000 members, of which more than 80 per cent are based in Mexico, with only 179 members hailing from Los Angeles itself (Jiménez 2019: 147–8). In 2015, the main annual festivity of New York's most important shrine attracted around 300 devotees (Higuera Bonfil 2016: 244). A generous extrapolation from national hot spots renders no more than a few hundred thousand devotees in the United States and Canada. Considering Central America's entire population of 53 million (2023), it seems reasonable to add another few hundred thousand devotees, making a current total of 1.5–2 million devotees – an impressive number for a cult practically unknown twenty-five years ago.<sup>1</sup>

Understanding the evolution of Santa Muerte devotion warrants a look at the main shifts in Mexico's religious landscape. First, during the last half a century Mexico experienced a sustained trend towards religious diversity. Whereas in 1950 around 98 per cent of the population defined as Catholic, by 2000 this was 87 per cent, a significant decline but less markedly than in the rest of Latin America (Blancarte 2005: 225; Ramírez 2009: 80). By 2020, the percentage had further dropped to 77 per cent. The largest part of the population no longer adhering to Catholicism belongs to an array of evangelical and biblical denominations (about 12 per cent), while the rest is made up of other religious currents, and the nebulous but large group of three million people (about 2.5 per cent) categorized as 'believers without religious affiliation' (INEGI 2021).

Second, there has been the profound impact of secularization, which comprises not only 9.5 million people with no religion in 2020 (ca. 7.5 per cent) but also the significant development, especially among Catholics, of more freedom of conscience in moral and religious matters. Without breaking with their faith, Catholic believers increasingly regulate their lives at a distance from the

<sup>1</sup> There is no evidence that devotees in other parts of the world exceed 10,000–20,000.

ecclesiastic normativity and eliminate ‘institutional intermediaries in the search of salvation’ (Blancarte 2005: 227).

Third, a key feature of Mexico’s changing religious landscape concerns the meanings and practices of popular Catholicism. There is evidence of a ‘loosening’ creed: 47 per cent and 18 per cent of Catholics identified as ‘traditional’ and ‘*sui generis*’ believers, respectively, as opposed to a quarter as believers ‘by conviction’ (ENCREER 2016: 33).<sup>2</sup> Thus, for two-thirds of Mexican Catholics denominational identity has more to do with culturally inherited religious rituals than with underlying ecclesiastically sanctioned beliefs and norms. Being a ‘*sui generis*’ Catholic connotes a ‘remarkable permeability to heterodox beliefs and practices’ (ENCREER 2016: 62). In fact, most Santa Muerte devotees continue to think of themselves as Catholics. Since the 1960s, Mexican Catholics have ‘completed an enormous *silent revolution* through which they have, stealthily and slowly, become independent from the hierarchical dominance [of the Church] over their daily actions’ (Blancarte 2005: 297).

Finally, sociocultural trends and political conditions during the late 1980s led to constitutional reforms in religious matters. Ever since the Mexican revolution (1910–1917), the state had not recognized the legal status of churches and religious associations. The 1992 constitutional reform normalized relations by granting all existing churches juridical status as religious associations and citizens the right to establish new ones. It also allowed them buying and selling real estate properties. Voting rights of the clergy were restored (Blancarte 2005: 285–7; Ramírez 2009: 66–7).

The expansion and changing face of Santa Muerte devotion in the early twenty-first century soon drew scholarly attention. This was partly a response to journalistic reports and literary accounts (Ambrosio 2003; Aridjis 2003). According to Spanish anthropologist Juan Antonio Flores Martos, these were fraught with a ‘superficial, sensationalistic vision for [popular] dissemination that explored – and exploited – this cult’ (2007: 281). Mexican anthropologist Perla Fragozo commented that they associated Santa Muerte devotion with illegality and crime (2007b: 24). Both called for serious scholarly research. Leaving aside scattered references by previous generations of anthropologists (see Section 1), at the time of this call a few scholarly texts had already been published. As a religious phenomenon in the making, Santa Muerte constituted a fascinating laboratory and sparked a new research field. By the early 2000s, a pattern in reporting and studying the cult was already discernible.

<sup>2</sup> Here ‘*sui generis*’ refers to ‘in their own way’ (‘*a su manera*’ in Spanish), rather than following ecclesiastic prescriptions.

First, journalistic interest in the cult has remained strong in Mexico and abroad (Gil Olmos 2010; Lorusso 2013). This includes reports in newspapers, magazines, and books, but also documentaries, films, and blogs. This interest cannot be dissociated from brutal drug trafficking-related violence and militarized government responses. Second, Elsa Malvido's seminal 2005 article about the cult's iconographic and religious precedents inaugurated the first wave of studies from Mexican anthropology. Katia Perdigón published the first book about Santa Muerte (2008), while Fragoso's 2007 Master Thesis started an unabated stream of postgraduate anthropological dissertations. Theirs and the later work of De la Fuente, García Zavala, Garcés Marrero, Hernández Hernández, Higuera Bonfil, Valverde Montaña, Yllescas Illescas, and others represent essential contributions to understanding Santa Muerte devotion. Third, John Thompson and Claudio Lomnitz's early work marked the beginning of a significant involvement of US and especially European (anthropological) scholarship. The latter included the work of Argyriadis, Bigliardi, Flores Martos, Graf, Huffschnid, Kristensen, Lamrani, Mancini, Michalik, Müller, and Perrée, while the former included that of Roush, Kingsbury, and Chesnut, who published the first English-language book on the cult.

This Element draws upon my own ethnographic research carried out since 2014, as well as the scholarship by this ever more integrated network of researchers, the quantity and quality of which debunks Malgorzata Oleszkiewicz-Peralba's unwarranted assertion that 'there is almost no scholarly literature' on Santa Muerte (2015: 104). With its global expansion, the study of the cult has matured and moved in different conceptual, methodological, and thematic directions. At least three shifts can be identified. First, alongside the study of origins, iconography, and societal context, a new interest in the experiences and daily practices of devotees has arisen, using concepts as lived religion (Garcés Marrero 2021; Yllescas Illescas 2023) and *poiēsis* (Graf 2023). In this Element, I use the term 'religion-making' and stress the importance of bottom-up agency. Second, while early publications largely focused on devotional centres and practices in Mexico City, more and more research has been carried out elsewhere in Mexico and beyond. This Element draws on my fieldwork at different congregations not only in the capital but also in San Luis Potosí, Guadalajara, Puebla, and Ciudad Juárez. Finally, thematic and conceptual diversification has produced comparative work about music, attire, tattoos, gender, migration, and articulations with other popular religions. Since the cult of Saint Death is alive and well, much empirical and interpretative research lies ahead.

Section 1 examines the origins of Santa Muerte devotion and popular narratives about them. I discuss the histories of specific (Catholic) religious practices



and iconographies as well as Mexican traditions of mortuary imagery. Acknowledging ethnographical, historiographical, and archival limitations, I argue that historically distinctive features of popular Latin American Catholicism compose the quintessential ‘mold’ of current Santa Muerte devotion, with its visual exuberance, expressive creativity, and symbolic enjoyment. Section 2 reviews the material culture and expressive forms of the cult and considers how these relate to the ‘personification’ and intimacy of the saint. It also examines key places of worship. I argue that the vibrancy and expressive diversity of Santa Muerte material culture is driven by grassroots devotional agency. Section 3 studies devotional practices and rituals such as individual prayers and offerings, and collective gatherings. At the core of Santa Muerte beliefs and theology lie unconditional faith and reciprocity centred on acquiring protection and support. Expressive diversity, the absence of a sanctioned canon, popular religion-making, and devotional and ritualistic agency both enable and are shaped by the cult’s organizational and political structures and dynamics, which is the subject of Section 4. Section 5 focuses on the social and economic contextualization of Santa Muerte practices. I investigate vulnerable livelihoods, ineffective social protections, and insecurity, which constitute a breeding ground for ordinary citizens to look for protection from alternative transcendental entities. The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic is briefly examined. This section ends with a look at the cult’s relationship with the Catholic Church. An Epilogue closes this Element.

## 1 Origins and Background of Santa Muerte Devotion

For most people the first encounter with a Santa Muerte effigy produces feelings of bewilderment, disquiet or even indignation. And yet, Santa Muerte popular religiosity is far from an extraneous element in Mexico’s sociocultural landscape but part of its rich religious tapestries. For centuries social groups and institutions with dissimilar ideas about faith and spirituality were involved in weaving and undoing these tapestries. To explore these complex processes, this section first distinguishes between popular (emic) narratives about Santa Muerte’s origins and scholarly (etic) work. Shifting to the latter, the analysis differentiates between histories of specific popular religious iconographies and practices, and broader symbolic repertoires about death and the dead. The former surveys skeletal images and imageries in colonial Mexico, with a brief excursion into precolonial imaginations of death as well as the rich history of Catholic folk saints, shrines, and miraculous images. The latter looks at broad cultural traditions of mortuary imagery, especially as represented by the Day of the Dead celebrations, and the secular imagery of the dressed female skeleton