



Prifysgol Cymru
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Women and Religion

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Trawsnewid Addysg; Trawsnewid Bywydau
Transforming Education; Transforming Lives



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Santa Muerte

- Started in Mexico
- Fastest growing new religious movement in the Americas
- 10– 12 million followers, most in Mexico, Central America and the USA



- a female folk saint who personifies death
- -> not officially accepted by the Catholic Church
 - heretical and blasphemous, bishops even threatened Catholics who worshiped Holy Death with excommunication

Roots

- Her origins are syncretic:
 - deriving from Catholicism, Indigenous spirituality and including elements of Santeria and New Age influence
- Usually depicted as a female Grim Reaper wielding the same scythe and wearing a shroud like the European male counterpart

Santa Muerte as

- ... inclusive
 - “Death is said to judge no one as she comes to us all, no matter colour nor creed.”
- The folk saint is open to all types of petitions from people of all origins, genders and sexual orientations.

- Some similarity with Virgin of Guadalupe
 - -> "Santa Muerte is believed to be endowed with motherly qualities, taking care of her devotees by rewarding them with generous miracles. She may be gentle and sweet like Guadalupe." (2021: 51)
- However, although she is caring, Santa Muerte may also be ireful and vindictive.

Short video

- Santa Muerte in the USA (You can ask her for everything)
- https://youtu.be/VVulv_JCtXM?si=mVaeY9B9_qOSNHk9

Gender Image

- Often misrepresented and attacked in media
- Santa Muerte has been portrayed as a 'narco-saint'
- -> a saint worshiped by narcotraffickers
- Often described that only as violent, barbaric males follow it
- However, research present a different picture

However ...

- According to Chesnut and Kingsbury, female devotees outnumber male devotees 2 to 1
- “It is women that were and remain at the forefront of the expansion of the new religious movement (Kingsbury and Chesnut 2020b)” (Kingsbury 2021:44)

Background

- Mexico is traditionally a male dominated society
- The restriction of women to the house has increased in recent years / decades due to the narcotics and gang culture
 - “the violent patriarchal, Mexican narco-state which is ‘founded around the exclusion of women’ (Wright 2011,34).” (Kingsbury 2021: 45)

Popular religiosity

- Women deal traditionally in Mexico with death
 - Women arrange funeral rites, prepare food and clean up
- -> funerals create opportunities for female leadership
- -> this continues into Santa Muerte devotion

Kingsbury's research

- Fieldwork in rural Oaxaca between 2018 and 2020
- twice as many followers are female
- all shrines and chapels to Santa Muerte were founded and are tended to by women

Female Founding figures

- Doña Queta, also known as Enriqueta Romero
 - a poor housewife, set up a small altar in her kitchen corner from where she sold quesadillas to locals, in Tepito, Mexico City, to try to earn a bit of money. Seeing the altar adorned with an effigy of Santa Muerte and objects of worship, they asked to leave offerings.

Prayers answered

- Doña Queta was worried about her son's incarceration in jail which is a dangerous place in Mexico.
- Queta's prayers were heard, and her son was released.
- Due to large amount of offerings, she moved her altar out onto the street on November 1st.

Pilgrimage site

- Queta decided to reinvest devotees' donations into enlarging it.
- Soon it became a large, renowned shrine.
- For the last 10 years, it has been a pilgrimage site for Santa Muertistas

Fame

- The National Geographic described Doña Queta as 'an alternately fierce and motherly woman' (2013).
- -> a woman may be both fierce and a mother.
- -> this description encapsulates Santa Muerte's qualities, coalescing those of the women that worship her.



- According to Kingsbury “women, through Santa Muerte, have fashioned a matrifocal movement to cope with the violence and death perpetrated by men and the male-dominated state.” (2021: 44)

Santa Muerte ...

- ...reproduces (at least partly) the traditional Catholic Mexican cultural association of women with death which is associated with the domestic space, the traditional female sphere

- But "...it also creatively subverts this discourse by enabling women to emerge empowered in the public, male sphere through their devotion to death...."(Kingsbury 2021: 46)

- Despite the rejection of the devotion by the Roman Catholic Church, Kingsbury reports that many participants in her study considered themselves and the saint Catholic
- -> Santa Muerte as a post-Catholic folk faith

- “Through Santa Muerte, women have created new opportunities for themselves and supported their communities. They have established shrines adjoined to their homes that have drawn swathes of followers, segueing from the private into the public space. Furthermore, such female leaders have acquired financial independence, power and prestige in their local communities.”
(Kingsbury 2021: 45)

Main Reading

- Kingsbury, Kate. Death is Women's Work: Santa Muerte, a Folk Saint and Her Female Followers. *International Journal of Latin American Religions* (2021) 5:43–63.
- This and other articles are on Moodle

Further Reading

- Chesnut, Andrew (2012). *Devoted to death Santa Muerte, the skeleton saint*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
 - (access to e-copy of book via reading list or directly via the library catalogue)