

At Death's Door in Cancun: Sun, Sea, and Santa Muerte

KATE KINGSBURY 

Department of Anthropology
University of Alberta
13-15 HM Tory Building
Edmonton, Alberta T6G 2H4, Canada

SUMMARY *This article describes a visit to a Santa Muerte shrine in Cancun, offering insight into why devotees are dedicated to the Mexican Saint of Death. Rites to the folk saint allow locals to express their needs and demands in a tourist city where they are otherwise beholden to visitors and their requirements. A quiet form of feminism is at play at the shrine, run by a woman, self-identified bruja, shaman, and curandera, Yuri Mendez, and her all-women team who support their community through their spiritual offerings and in return acquire prestige and financial independence. [Santa Muerte, Mexico, tourism, women, death]*

Santa Muerte is the Mexican female folk saint of death. She has millions of devotees across Mexico, including thousands in Cancun, where *Santa Muertistas* (devotees of the saint) congregate at chapels dedicated to her. The largest of these is owned by Yuri Mendez, who offers various magic and spiritual cleansing services to the devotees who come to honor the saint of death.

Most of Yuri's clients work in the tourism industry where they must constantly cater to the requirements of others. At Yuri's shrine, rites and prayers give them an avenue to express their needs, fears and find support within a city where, as a result of the mushrooming tourism industry, they struggle with inequality, precarity, and danger. Yuri also offers specific services that have a special appeal to Mexican women. For Mendez and her all-female staff, the shrine has become a means of empowerment, allowing them to obtain social capital, spiritual prestige, and financial autonomy in a space where they operate outside of the tourist industry, supporting a community of locals and migrants.

This article is the result of a brief trip to Cancun in 2020. I have conducted fieldwork on Santa Muerte, in particular with the female followers of Oaxaca, since 2017, including with the Indigenous owner of a shrine in a village close to Tonameca (Kingsbury 2019, 2020, 2021; Kingsbury and Chesnut 2020a, 2020b, 2020c, 2021). Although Yuri, her staff, and I only met briefly during my 2020 trip, after which COVID-19 travel restrictions curtailed my work, we formed a long-lasting relationship. Our weekly online conversations on social media and WhatsApp have allowed me to conduct further fieldwork via digital ethnography. I am a member of Yuri's Facebook group dedicated to Santa Muerte and

her chapel, which has over seventeen thousand members who converse daily. I have become a part of this community, playing an active role that has allowed me to glean much more information through public and private conversations with devotees.

There are ten to twelve million followers of Santa Muerte, most of them in Mexico (Chesnut 2017, 10). Based on my study of this new religious movement over the past four years, my scholarship has sought to redress the erroneous image of Santa Muerte in portrayals by the Catholic Church, the Mexican state, and mass media across the Americas (Kingsbury 2020, 2021; Kingsbury and Chesnut 2020a, 2020b, 2020c). Like Vodou, the folk faith has been devalued in much media as a “deviant” pseudo-religion and outside of Mexico depicted in a manner “aimed to evoke terror ...without openly entering into racist discourse” (McGee 2012, 232). I aim to rectify this racist and sexist image.

The church, the state, and the media have reduced Santa Muerte to a “narcosaint,” depicting it as a deity venerated by male drug dealers. The Catholic Church and its clergy keen to stanch the hemorrhaging of its flock, have publicly decried Santa Muerte as satanic. “Ironically, although those outside the folk faith often define Santa Muertistas as non-Catholic, ... devotees consider themselves and the saint Catholic” and welcome those familiar with Christian traditions (Kingsbury 2020, 6).

The Mexican state, under the administration of Felipe Calderon, directed the army to raze scores of shrines dedicated to Santa Muerte, using her as a scapegoat for drug-related crimes (Kingsbury and Chesnut 2020a), and to draw attention away from what some authors have termed *narco-politics*, the inextricable links between drugs and politics (Patenostro 1995).

Even in Western media, Santa Muerte is used to imbue scenes with male terror, such as in *Breaking Bad*, *True Detective*, and *Ghost Recon*. Although some narcotraffickers practice Santa Muerte, they are a minority. “Many cartel members venerate the Catholic saint of lost causes, St. Jude, or practice Palo, or Santeria, yet these have not attracted the same sensationalistic media attention” (Kingsbury 2020, 6). Labeling the folk faith as a “narco-cult” silences the voices and experiences of most devotees, who come from marginalized backgrounds such as low-income groups living in financial and physical insecurity, often due to drug violence and poverty. Furthermore, in a sexist fashion, it mutes the voices of women who have been integral to the burgeoning movement, taking on pioneering roles as leaders across Mexico.

Many of these women have, in fact, gained prestige, power, and financial autonomy, leaving exploitative jobs and overcoming onerous circumstances (Kingsbury 2020). Devotees have welcomed me into their communities and appreciate the work I have shared with them (some of it in Spanish) as it redresses the image of Santa Muerte and speaks to the realities of the folk faith and its followers. Some hide their devotion to death because many have experienced discrimination due to their beliefs. Many are tired of mainstream portrayals of Santa Muerte as a demonic faith.

The new religious movement has been propelled in large part by female devotees and leaders who comprise a loose-knit network. My work with female followers has put me in touch with devotees across Mexico, including Yuri Mendez, who runs a large shrine in Cancun. In Tonameca, where I previously

did fieldwork, many turn to Santa Muerte to cope with poverty, death, disease, distress, femicide in semi-rural impoverished conditions, but in Cancun, as I detail, the context is different as tourism is the mainstay of the economy and creates the inequalities I describe below.

Upon a trip to Quintana Roo in 2020, shortly before the beginning of the COVID-19 lockdowns, I found myself in a paradoxical situation. I was simultaneously a tourist, a researcher of the anthropology of tourism, and a scholar of Santa Muerte. While anthropologists used to assume insider/outsider status was binary, more recently, it has been understood that boundaries between the two positions are not demarcated; there is slippage and fluidity between them. My positionality allowed me to negotiate and explore the interconnections between the tourist zone, the people within it, the Santa Muerte chapel, and those present there. The latter also occupy multiple roles: simultaneously workers, family members, and, some, Santa Muerte devotees. My connections with those working in the tourist industry, whom I observed both in their workplace and at the shrine, ultimately led me to view Santa Muerte devotion in Cancun as a response to the anomie tourism has created, and the shrine as a space wherein workers can express their needs in contradistinction to the tourist space, where these must be suppressed.

A Simulated City

Cancun consists of environments created for extracting dollars from gringo vacationers and is known to many locals as the capital of *Plástico Fantástico* (fantastic plastic). The government developed tourism in this region because they needed dollars to repay debt (Torres and Momsen 2005). Locals have observed monumental changes since the 1970s. Just fifty years ago, the area was barely populated. Today's architecture comprises overgrown hotel blocks with phony pirate boats as bars, garish casinos, and obstreperous discotheques with names like Cocobongo. The concrete jungle—teeming with tourists and the many Mexicans who wait on them—is juxtaposed with the palm-peppered coastline, perfect white sand beaches, and shimmering turquoise water, where the sun shines without fail and sets amidst pastel pink plumes of clouds.

The balmy beaches at their disposal and round-the-clock entertainment may make the place seem like paradise for the tourists. For many locals, it is a different story. The area of Quintana Roo has shifted sharply. Once reliant on fishing in the Cancun area and “mixed subsistence economy” to the south of Cancun and Riviera Maya in the central and southern portions of the state (which separated from Yucatan in 1974), it flipped to a cash and commodity-based “commercialized tourist-oriented economy” wherein people are dependent on tourists to make money (Juárez 2002, 113). This transition has resulted in ecological, political, and social changes (Daltabuit and Pi-Sunyer 1990) and anomie, consisting of a breakdown of societal values due to these rapid shifts, resulting in feelings of a lack of belonging and disconnectedness. While tourism has brought many benefits, such as modern infrastructure, in a region that has long seen hardships, this dependence on gringo dollars has dangers that have been made more apparent during times of coronavirus. Over eighty thousand people lost their jobs in the formal economy in Cancun in May 2020 and

innumerable more in the informal tourist economies (Kingsbury and Chesnut 2020b).

While tourism's impact is not solely negative—some have climbed up the socioeconomic ladder thanks to tourism—acquisition of wealth and status has largely aligned with Mexico's skin hierarchy and gender hierarchy. Although Mexico claims to be a mestizo nation that embraces "racial and cultural mixing" and "inclusivity," in reality, it is "exclusive" (Navarrete Linares 2004, 8, 32). Mestizaje contains clear racial hierarchies where Whiteness is valued and Indigenusness marginalized. In Mexico, there is a correlation between class and color (*ibid.*, 32). In general terms, those who occupy prestigious and well-paid jobs such as the manager of a major hotel—rather than its restaurant—or head of a major real estate office are all men with lighter complexions from the middle or upper classes from outside the region. They come from Mexico City, Spain, or affluent second- and third-generation Mexican families in the US.

Some Maya, the local Indigenous population, have benefitted from tourism, yet they have also been harmed. Some use the tourist gaze to impel state recognition for their Indigenous identities and rights (Hawn and Tison 2015). Others have been able to sell land to developers. Nevertheless, while institutional recognition may sound good on paper, in practice, the Maya, whose poverty levels saw "no appreciable reduction" in the last decade (*ibid.*) have been positioned as "structurally and ideologically inferior" (Juarez 2002, 120). Due to racial discrimination, they have gained the least opportunities in the tourist industry. There is both "caution and resentment of becoming marginalized people in their own land" (Pi-Sunyer, Thomas, and Daltabuit 1999, 45). As an affluent, light-complected property developer from Mexico City admitted to me, "the Maya have the worst and lowest-paid jobs in Cancun because they are *Indios* ("Indians"). Most no longer farm; instead, they are scrubbing toilets."

Due to the influx of wealthy foreigners, land prices have skyrocketed, making rents and property expensive. In some cases, local dwellers have been dispossessed of their land to build hotels and condos for the privileged. Locals have also witnessed hikes in the cost of essential goods. Once-pristine environments have been decimated to build hotels and other facilities. Ecosystems have become polluted with everything from plastic waste to the incessant sounds of bars and nightclubs.

Poverty rates declined by five percent for local non-Indigenous populations in the last ten years (Hawn and Tison 2015). Nevertheless, in Cancun there is no apparent emerging middle class as a result of tourism. The "dominant discourse on globalization" assumes "tourism alleviates poverty and increases well-being," but in Quintana Roo, there is evidence to the contrary (Juarez 2002, 113). For many, their precarity has increased, and, faced with anomie, some have turned to Santa Muerte to attempt to resolve their many problems.

The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly of Tourism

Felipe, a thirty-one-year-old man who works as a doorman at a hotel, described his childhood as idyllic. While the tourist industry had already been in swing, it had not consumed the city as it does now. He recalled trips to empty beaches with his parents, swimming in the unsullied sea, and running through

the fecund jungle. During his lifetime, Felipe watched as the jungle was torn down to build shopping malls, resorts, casinos, theme parks, and more, catering to the ever-increasing numbers of tourists.

Tourism, however, has created employment. Those who have migrated have gained access to services like medical care and educational opportunities for their children. Some came from places where they grew “their own food, do not pay rent, [and] use natural resources to build their homes. ... Lacking similar resources in Cancún, migrants find it difficult to survive on minimum-wage salaries” (Castellanos 2010, 111). Low salaries have created new forms of social suffering, which has led migrants in Cancun to describe tourism as “*la nueva esclavitud*,” the new slavery (ibid.). Implicit are recollections of slavery in the Spanish colony when the local populace was forced to carry out tasks by their colonial overlords (Azcárate, 2020).

Tourism is a gendered industry embedded within a global dynamic of inequality between the sexes (Pritchard and Morgan, 2000). While women may find financial autonomy and status, on the whole, they are constrained by the prejudicial terms under which they enter the workforce (Chant, 2002). Women’s work is concentrated in seasonal, part-time and low-paid activities such as retail, hospitality and cleaning (Ferguson, 2011). Men in Cancun generally have better-paid jobs than women, interacting with guests where there are more chances for upward mobility and amassing tips. In contrast, women usually do the invisible chores, earn lower wages, and have less contact with tourists, so they cannot supplement meager wages with tips. Furthermore, lack of child-care and related social services has proved a significant impediment for women’s empowerment and gender equality in the tourist industry. This gendered divide is also racialized, with Maya women having the worst-paying and most low-status jobs of all in the tourist industry. It is not uncommon that they face abuse (Barrera Rojas 2018).

In Cancun, this gendered, ethnic, and racial discrimination is expressed in social spaces through job hierarchies (Gracia and Horbath 2019) and through performances towards those more elevated in the hierarchy. Tourist workers are trained to act specific roles within their institutional setting and express “attributes such as deference, eagerness to please and friendliness” (Edensor 2001, 69) to those they serve. These self-performances reflect not only the divisions between tourists and workers but also gendered and racialized structural inequities. Tourism depends upon such structural violence, systematically producing and reproducing these inequalities (Harvey 2006).

Cancun is not only plagued by structural violence but also cartel violence. As the economy has shifted to cash consumption, gangs have moved into the territory. Many fear the New Jalisco Generation Cartel, the latest narcos in town. “Although for gringos it is safe,” Felipe told me, “as they are protected in hotels by security personnel, nobody cares about keeping us safe. Many of the places we live in are haunted by the threat of violence.”

In addition to fear of cartel brutality, Felipe told me he was concerned that even though the many establishments catering to tourists proffer work, they have also caused prices to skyrocket for locals who cannot afford to go to their beaches.

There are no beaches we Mexicans can go to, they have all been bought by the hotels, and we are often not welcome. Plus we cannot afford to go to them as they charge fees and drinks to use these beaches that on our salaries are not affordable.¹ There are some beaches that are supposed to be public, but tourist resorts have even taken over those and, if we try to use them, their security guards force us to leave the premises.

Tourism has allowed the rich who own establishments to grow richer. For those who work in these establishments, life is expensive.

Eulalia, a cleaner at a local hotel, told me that she is paid under US\$200 per month for a shift that can extend over nine hours. If tourists tip, she may earn another hundred dollars. Nevertheless, her boss has told her to perform her role discreetly, and she does not speak English, so her presence is often overlooked, and she cannot rely on tips. She told me that 2020 was a terrible year. She and her children suffered. The lack of visitors also affected those in front-stage jobs such as waiters, most of whom rely on tips. Due to the Jalisco cartel gun violence that hit the mainstream media and then later COVID-19, many tourists chose to go on holiday elsewhere, or not at all.

Meanwhile, Eulalia's husband is unable to support their family. He cannot work after an accident at a hotel construction site left him handicapped. In Cancun, there is a lack of worker protection and rights in the workplace. Although severance pay and other benefits have been introduced in recent years, many businesses finagle ways of reducing benefits that workers are due. For Eulalia, with a disabled husband and three small children to support in an expensive city, life is not easy. For tourists, prices at the many Dominos pizzas and burger joints may seem affordable, but these prices are for those who earn over US\$2000 a month, not \$200. Some seek to escape from this space where they cater to others, to one where someone can take care of them. They find the strength to deal with their difficulties at the shrine of Santa Muerte.

Death in Cancun

In Cancun, where Starbucks and Domino's Pizza are on every other corner, it seems hard to find anything that is not imported. However, those willing to venture off the beaten track might have the opportunity to stare the Mexican "Saint of Death" in the eye. On an indistinct street in a barrio in downtown Cancun, a lavish Santa Muerte shrine is owned by a renowned local healer, Yuri Mendez, who has acquired significant prestige in her community. Yuri is from Comalcalco, Tabasco, famous for its Maya archaeological site. She works with "Beloved Death," as she says, to ease the physical and mental ailments of Cancunians. Most of her clients work in the tourism industry, and a large number are women and girls. The shrine is juxtaposed with the touristic sites where they work, yet holds some similarities. In tourist spaces, foreigners can relax and be pampered by others who attend to their needs, while at the shrine, locals can experience relaxation and catharsis thanks to Yuri's ministrations and those of her all-women team. Rather than having to remain invisible and subservient to the needs of others, whether tourists or bosses, those who come to the chapel

can express their difficulties, seek solace, and find the strength to cope with their circumstances.

Sometimes called “Holy Death” in English, Santa Muerte is a Mexican folk saint who personifies death. Santa Muerte is represented as a female Grim Reaper wielding a scythe and donning a flowing shroud. She often carries a globe signifying her deathly dominion over the ecumene. She has a fierce, distinctive persona. She has been described to me by devotees as “*una chingona*” (a bad-ass woman), and can be turned to for good and bad. Locals propitiate the female folk saint for miracles and favors and she has a loyal following among women and girls who imagine her as a ferocious mother who will care for them tenaciously in the face of danger and distress (Kingsbury and Chesnut 2020c).

It takes my taxi a long time to find the healer’s home. Rows and rows of identical houses with peeling paint line a downtown district of Cancun, each indistinguishable from the other. At the end of an ordinary road, I meet an extraordinary sight. Santa Muerte’s hollow gaze hails me into a garden shrine. She appears in many forms in this oasis of death. In her first manifestation, beside a pond, she is a fertility goddess. Several statuettes overlook a water-filled purple basin where women toss coins and other tokens to their icon and ask Death to bring life to barren wombs and bless them with a baby (see Fig. 1).

Indeed, the first devotee I meet recounts how she supplicated the saint out of fear that her babe would not be born. With tears streaming down her cheeks, she recalls how, many months pregnant, she thought her baby would die, especially as her job as a cleaner in a hotel had allowed little time off during her pregnancy and meant she was always on her feet. An ultrasound had revealed that her child’s neck was being strangled by its umbilical cord. Distraught, she did not know what to do, but that very day Yuri gifted her with a statuette. Together they prayed for the baby’s survival. Their petition, I was told, was answered a month or so later when a beautiful, healthy baby was born. Ever since, Laura has been a believer in the Saint Death’s powers of life. She aids Yuri in managing the many clients that come to the shrine and no longer works in the tourist industry, finding much more enjoyment, autonomy, and respect in her new job working to aid the local community.

The Salubrious Saint

As one advances from the fertility pool, there is a white archway with an ivory statuette at its fulcrum. This second manifestation, I am informed, is “*la Santa Sanadora*” (Salubrious Saint; see Fig. 2). As I admire the Angel of Death with white wings, I hear Yuri intoning to the accompaniment of mystical music: “*Santisima Muerte, bendice mi día y también mi suerte...*” (Saint Death, please bless my luck and my day). In the central shrine that lies in the building opposite the garden, Yuri delivers spiritual services to clients. Yuri defines herself as a *curandera* (traditional healer), *bruja* (witch), and a *chamana* (shaman).

Each day of the week is dedicated to a different need. On Mondays, Yuri offers red Santa Muerte magic of love and passion. Health and healing ceremonies take place on Tuesdays, and on Wednesdays, she provides cleansing rites to rid businesses or homes of negative energy. Thursdays, she proffers her



Figure 1.
Death's fertility pool where women and men pray for death to bless them with babies [Color figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/terms-and-conditions)]

clientele tarot readings and hexing of enemies. Fridays are for spiritual cleansings of all types, especially exorcising evil spirits.

In the garden, I advance towards red Santa Muerte. The saint-as-love-sorceress stands on a column with red flowers at her side (see Fig. 3). I realize that a large queue of clients is waiting for the witch. A long line of at least ten people is anticipating their turn. Most work in the tourist industry, I later find out. None are from the lighter-complected affluent classes. Some are speaking a Mayan language. I am suddenly aware of my appearance as a white tourist because the shrine, I confirm later, is never visited by tourists. It is a space where locals come to escape the travails of the tourist industry. I cannot help but think of Goffman's (1956) work on front stage and back stage performances. No longer performing in roles of subservience for tourists, locals are finally free to express their needs in a space where religious leaders perform rituals to cater to their requirements.

We approach a purple effigy of the saint at the end of the garden adjacent to the main road. Laura tells me that this Santa is the guardian of the chapel, keeping out evil and trespassers. The cadaverous custodian is surrounded like



Figure 2.
***La Santa Sanadora* (the healing Saint).**
The color white is used for cleansing and healing
[Color figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

the Greek goddess Hekate by a pack of dogs, as well as cats and other creatures (see Fig. 4).

I notice a store opposite the chapel. It offers candles, statues, incense, scapulars, lotions, and many other accouterments (see Fig. 5). It is managed by one of Yuri's female staff, who used to work at a hotel as a laundrywoman. She tells me she much prefers working in this shop, where she is better paid, has fewer hours, and, most of all, is treated with respect by a female boss who values her work and treats her like a human, not a machine. She enjoys interacting with the people who come to the shop. She has a friendly and validating rapport with them, rather than being an invisible, silent cog in the tourist industry. She sells me a golden statuette of Santa Muerte as an Aztec warrior as well as a votive for abundance.

Behind us lies a patch of forest. On the ground at the entrance of the wooded path are plates ashen from burning incense and containing other offerings. I am advised not to touch these and not to venture into the grove of trees, which is where the shaman works her magic at night, conducting secret rites by an ancient tree and a *cenote* (a natural well).



Figure 3.
Santa Muerte as love sorceress.
Her red mantle symbolizes her role as worker of love magic.
[Color figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/terms-and-conditions)]

At last, the chapel grows quiet, Yuri's voice no longer resounds, and, as a client leaves the shrine, I am invited in to meet the *curandera*. The customer, I later learn, is having trouble with her male boss at a local hotel. She has asked Yuri to perform a *dominio* (a spell of domination), so that rather than being overbearing with her, henceforth her boss shall bend to her will and needs. I am shown a candle typically used as part of this ritual. It features a man on bended knee, head bowed, below a woman who wields a whip in her hand and looks down on him imperiously.

I am told many women come to Yuri to deal with domineering bosses, difficult male co-workers, and problematic husbands. Some spouses, I am told, drink off half the hard-earned salaries that their wives make in the tourist industry, leaving insufficient funds to feed the children. Others are physically or verbally abusive, and spells may be requested to be able to leave such a spouse. These may include money spells, allowing women to achieve greater financial autonomy. Given that women typically earn significantly less than men in the tourist industry, leaving an abusive partner is not just a question of volition but also of being able to afford to do so.



Figure 4.
Santa Muerte as cadaverous custodian guarding the chapel and its gardens together with her animal helpers. The color purple is associated with magic and healing. [Color figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

In her role as *curandera*, Yuri not only performs rites but also listens to women and counsels them to put their safety first. Yuri has made her feminist beliefs and support for women apparent. For example, with the recent spate of tragic femicides in Quintana Roo. During rosaries, Yuri publicly denounced the murders to her seventeen thousand followers on her social media page. She posted that Santa Muerte is “feminista” and exhorted women and men to join her in the public demonstrations denouncing patriarchy and femicide. While her male partner is sometimes present at the shrine, Yuri makes it clear that she is in charge. She has been so successful that she has opened three other esoteric boutiques in Cancun, which have allowed her, she said, to go from being impoverished to affording five-star hotel stays when she needs a break from work.

The Shrine

Inside, the shrine is resplendent with uncountable burning votive candles twinkling around tiny statues of death. There are larger statues surrounded by offerings of food, drink, and trinkets on tables covered with red cloths. The



Figure 5.

Yuri's Santa Muerte shop, where a member of her all-women team works, selling Santa Muerte wares. [Color figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

effigies that stand out to me are two savage-looking Santa Muertes with ferocious jaguar heads (see Fig. 6). They wear animal skins and wield sharp spears as if ready to pounce and attack, delivering death in one fell swoop. Later the *curandera* describes them as the saint in her fierce warrior incarnation; when women need strength to overcome their troubles, she says, these effigies are to be turned to.

The *pièce de résistance*, situated at the center of the chapel, is a trio of smiling feminine saints with wigs of long dark locks atop which sit spangly tiaras. These three Santa Muerte statues are dressed in immaculate white wedding gowns, and the brides are adorned lovingly with red roses for Valentine's Day.

Yuri steps forward from the center of the shrine. She is garbed in a long white *huipil* (a loose embroidered cotton tunic worn largely by Indigenous women) replete with traditional embroidery featuring carnation-colored birds and flowers. Her arms and legs are covered in tattoos of Santa Muerte, which she explains are offerings incarnate. Her warm, welcoming smile flows above the billowing smoke that wafts from the censer in her hand. It fills the air with the aroma of copal incense and engulfs me as I step forward to greet her (see



Figure 6.
Two effigies depicting Santa Muerte as a warrior.
 [Color figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

Fig. 7). In the other hand, she holds an arrangement of roses and, amidst the statues, she too resembles a bride of death. As I find out later, she is, in fact, a doctor of death.

Yuri tells me that she has been devoted to death for twenty-four years, during ten of which she has worked as death's shaman from the shrine we stand in. She built it to honor the saint, following a dream of *la Santa*. Dreams are the medium through which she communicates with the saint who guides her *curanderismo*. A dream is also how she first was informed of her powers. Yuri describes how, for many years, she suffered from numerous illnesses. One night, Death came to her as she lay sleeping. Dressed in a violet satin gown, Santa Muerte whispered in her left ear and told Yuri she possessed supernatural abilities of healing and magic. She promised Yuri that she would be healed if she began curing others and thus began the shaman's path.

Yuri describes herself as a "*bruja de las tres virtudes*" (witch of the three virtues). She details how she works with white, red, and black magic. White serves to cleanse and heal, red to work love magic, and black to hex, destroy, and bring death, destruction, and disease to enemies. The color triad of red, white, and black is widespread across world religions, invoking the three main energies



Figure 7.
Yuri, wafting incense around her shrine to cleanse it and offering roses to Santa Muerte. [Color figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/terms-and-conditions)]

that humans seek to manipulate; “not only do these colors stand for basic human experiences” such as bloodshed, semen, mother’s milk, excreta, and bodily dissolution, but they also provide a “primordial classification of reality” (Turner 1967, 89–90).

Daily, Yuri receives eighty to ninety people, she says, for *limpias* (spiritual cleansings) that cleanse her clients of cosmic grime. This dark energy—much as Mary Douglas wrote of pollution (1966)—sullies the sacred, and according to Yuri, prevents people from achieving their goals. These *limpias*, she explains, help lift curses and bad luck, which may hail from the past, bringing negativity, depression, and sickness. When such negativity is expelled, fortune, love, and luck return to peoples’ lives.

Yuri’s techniques are somewhat similar to those of other Santa Muerte *curanderas* I have encountered during my research. Still, as the faith is not presided over by any official body and consists of a loosely organized religion, Yuri has also crafted her own ways of working. Her methods include copal incense ablutions, egg cleansings, garlic rituals, prayer, and healing herbs (see Fig. 8). Yuri organizes rosaries where, she claims, over five hundred people congregate in prayer to ask for healing, safety from narco-violence, well-paid



Figure 8.

Yuri and her magical workshop. Behind her we see innumerable lotions and potions, as well as herbs that she uses in her spells, and cleansing work. To her right is another effigy of Santa Muerte with a bowl atop the globe that Yuri uses to mix up magical herbal remedies. [Color figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

work, reasonable bosses, and fortune for themselves. They come to pray for their loved ones to be blessed by La Santa's motherly love.

Indigenous Origins

Yuri describes Santa Muerte's origins to me as Indigenous. The Maya, she relates, venerated Ah Puch (also known as Yum Cimil), the god of the underworld. Yuri explains that the deity corresponds to the Aztec death deities of Mictlan, the Nahuatl name for the underworld, such as Mictecacihuatl and Mictlantecuhtli. Like them, Santa Muerte is a psychopomp and a modern version of the pre-Hispanic death deities. Yuri has even named one of her statues *Pilar Princesa Maya* (Pilar the Maya Princess). In casting Santa Muerte as Indigenous, Maya devotees reclaim dignity and pride at her shrine where their cultural heritage is exalted as powerful and sacred rather than being at the bottom of the hierarchy.

Yuri then introduces me to Yuritzia, the central statue in the shrine that has been dressed with particular care (see Fig. 9). Bedecked in a white satin wedding gown and a diamanté tiara, she carries a delicate Spanish-style fan in her left hand and a scythe adorned with roses and other flowers in her right.



Figure 9.
Yuri lovingly contemplating Yuritzia, the Queen of the Temple.
 [Color figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

Yuritzia, Yuri explains, "*es la Reina de nuestro templo*" (the Queen of the shrine). "Even though she is still Santa Muerte," Yuri says, "I have named her Yuritzia so that we may have a special and intimate relationship with her and connect on a deeper level." Yuri explains that the name derives from the Mayan appellation *Ixchel*, which means "goddess of moon rays," and that *itzia* means "Maya princess." I wonder whether the beginning of the saint's name refers to the owner herself. Still, I do not interrupt as Yuri details how her profound connection with Yuritzia ensures petitions will be heard.

Women Worshipping Death

I ask if the saint has a special appeal to women (Kingsbury 2019, 2020a; Kingsbury and Chesnut 2020c). Yuri responds that, as Death is female, she is aware of and sympathetic to the troubles women face—whether it be love imbroglios or quotidian vicissitudes.

Yuri recounts that Santa Muerte is a saint who brings justice, particularly to women. With the saint's support, Yuri aids women in overcoming their difficulties. These tribulations range from dealing with difficult male bosses or

co-workers, financial problems, husbands who refuse to give them money, raising their children as single mothers while working in the tourist industry, or facing domestic violence. Yuri relates that because Santa Muerte is a woman, "*ella sabe el sentimiento de dolor que tiene las mujeres*" (she knows the suffering women go through).

Death Rite with a Santa Muerte Witch

I step into the shrine. My methodology is grounded in immersing myself in an emic fashion in the field to understand how Santa Muertistas experience rituals (see Harris 1964, 1976). I want to convey descriptions that depict the world as they inhabit it. Nevertheless, I often find myself swinging back to etic thinking and interpreting events according to the many anthropological readings that I, as a researcher, have imbibed over the years. With this in mind, I show Yuri the items I have purchased from her esoteric shop and ask for her advice on how to proceed. She begins by bathing my body in copal incense, swaying her censer first across and then up and down my body. I find myself closing my eyes—the smoke is so dense it seems to submerge me. This is done, she informs me, to rid me of "*mala energía*" (bad energy), and to cleanse my soul.

Following this, Yuri instructs me to take the votive I have bought and pass it over every inch of my body from head to toe, performing what James Frazer would call an act of "contagious magic" (1993 [1890], 37–45). The aim is to imbue the candle with my energy. Yuri then hands me a pointed twig to inscribe the candle with my name, which she says will strengthen my petition. She asks me to focus on my intentions as she lights the votive for abundance and places it beneath a statue chosen to match my votive's motivation.

As Susan Greenwood has described, most people believe in superstitious ideas such as good or bad luck, ill omens, lucky charms, bad energy, and perfect timing (2009, 145–149). But most of us also ascribe to scientific thinking, aware that gravity, not God, makes an apple drop from a tree. We tend to switch between the two modes. Greenwood terms this process of flipping between magic thought and scientific analysis "not only but also" (ibid., 111). I find myself in a "not only but also" mode; I suspend scientific for magical thinking momentarily as I humbly ask the saint for the funds to return to Mexico for a lengthier period so that I can study Santa Muerte and her female followers in greater depth. Later, when I leave the shrine, I return to scientific thinking as I mull over approaching grant application deadlines. I realize that both modes, magic and scientific, might exist within me, without cognitive dissonance much as Roger Bastide described in his "*principe de coupure*" which "allows for the alternation or cohabitation, in a single individual ... of logics or categories that are supposedly otherwise incompatible and irreducible" (1955, 495).

Having also purchased an Aztec Warrior Santa Muerte statue at the esoteric shop, I show it to Yuri (see Fig. 10). "Your statue is asleep," she tells me. "We need to wake her up." Yuri speaks to my effigy, informing her to protect me and bring me prosperity, love, health, and wealth. Yuri addresses my icon with humility and reverence. She passes incense over the statue and then takes a cigarette from a pack and lights it. She puffs on the cigarette and then blows the smoke over the effigy. After this, she reverses the cigarette in her hand, placing



Figure 10.

Yuri Mendez and the author, holding the statue of Santa Muerte in her warrior form that the curandera has “awakened.”

[Color figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

its burning butt inside her mouth. She blows into it until sails of smoke suffuse my statue. She then puts the cigarette on the pointed helmet of the Aztec Santa Muerte. “The saint needs to finish the cigarette,” she says. The last stage in this death rite consists of circumambulating the garden with the statue in my hand, as it ostensibly puffs on the cigarette. I stop next to each effigy in the garden shrine so that my statue might absorb the qualities of each. And with this, I am apprised, my saint is now alive, awake, and there to protect me. I am free to go, safe in the knowledge that death is watching over me.

With the aid of her all-women team, Yuri caters day after day to the many problems presented by clients. She is seen as a wise woman by the many men and women who turn to her in their hour of need. She supports the community spiritually and is revered as a person of great power.

Conclusion

Although Cancun is a playground for the tourists who come to its sunny shores, most locals do not experience it as such. Instead, they live in a world of uncertainties where doctors may not be relied on for aid, where violence may create calamity, or where an errant or incapacitated husband may leave a spouse with a large family to feed. Such worries lead many to the healer's shrine where they can relax and let go of worries, as the tourists they cater to do on the white beaches of Cancun. As I experienced firsthand, rituals allow one to be listened to, cared for, and to feel relaxed and safe.

Yuri's shrine is named *Capilla de la Dulce Madre* (Chapel of the Sweet Mother), and like Mother Death, Yuri is a gentle yet strong maternal figure within her community. She offers support and solutions to her people, albeit for a fee. In her calm and charismatic presence, together with that of the formidable Saint of Death and with the aid of her all-female team, Yuri caters day-in and day-out to the many problems presented by clients who seek her services. She is seen as a wise woman by those who turn to her. As such, Yuri is revered as a person of power. Acquired through her role as death's doctor, her prestige and financial autonomy, together with that of her all-women team, speak of an implicit feminism and female empowerment that is quietly at work in a corner of Cancun, where women do not have to work for male bosses in the tourist industry and can achieve financial independence as well as social status. She and the female Saint of Death support the community—especially the many women that come to death's door who seek to better their lives in an environment where wealth and power are concentrated in the hands of men and tourists. One devotee explains to me that she leaves the shrine “with Death on my side; I am less afraid. She will keep me strong to face this life.”

As enclaves, tourist spaces are “strongly circumscribed and framed, wherein conformity to rules and adherence to centralized regulation hold sway.... [They are] carefully planned and managed to provide specific standards of cleanliness, service, décor, and ambiance” (Edensor 2001, 63). It is the job of the many Cancunians and migrant workers to keep up with the continual upkeep of such spaces. Many push aside their daily tribulations as they play the roles demanded of them, such as Eulalia, who constantly worried about her husband and paying the bills, yet had been told to remain discreet while cleaning rooms and smiling if she met tourists.

In their functions within the tourism industry, many workers are reduced to catering and listening to the needs of others. Jorge, a waiter at a seafront hotel, oscillated back and forth between the beach bar and tourists sunning themselves in lounge chairs, bringing whatever libations they requested. He subsisted on a low salary and mostly made ends meet through tips. His English was enough to understand drink orders but not to engage in further conversation. He was amazed that I could utter more than the usual “*una cerveza por*

favor" (a beer please) in Spanish. So, when I not only ordered a drink from him but also asked him in his mother tongue how his day was going, he suddenly dropped the veneer of a smile I noticed he had on permanently when on the beach and scowled, admitting that his feet were killing him and that he would happily trade places with me.

Cancunians working in the tourism industry are obliged to stay within the norms of performances "by a self-regulating of the body and the passions" (Goffman 1956, 79). Jorge, for example, had to ignore the pain in his feet and keep a smile on his face as he dashed back and forth between the beach bar and the lounging tourists with heavy trays of drinks day after day. Such workers take on what Judith Butler (2011, 10) has referred to as "split" identities. Within such touristic environments, they are oriented towards the needs of others, but outside of them, many Cancunians seek spaces where their demands can be heard and legitimized.

Yuri provides a space of healing where they may voice their difficulties. Like the tourists who are able to let go on the beach and be catered to, in this space, locals can experience such care. This is a place where fears may be expressed and anxieties legitimated. It is a space where it is possible to envision an alternative to the troubles of the present. Cleansing death rites, as I witnessed firsthand, allow for relaxation and a means to externalize worries. In their study of Latinx Marian devotion, Ortiz and Davis noted that catharsis is a vital component of ceremonies (2008). The relief experienced during rituals may aid psychosomatic conditions and alleviate psychological trauma. Additionally, such rites and religious frameworks offer a way of thinking about and dealing with situations of stress and anxiety. Men who live in Cancun, and women in particular, may not have other avenues to verbalize or deal with their distress—hope springs from Death's door.

Note

1. In October 2020, Yuri and several of my other respondents told me that they saw in the news that President Obrador signed a law that will impose heavy penalties on hotel and restaurant owners that do not allow Mexican citizens free access to beaches. Whether that law will be enforced is another matter, and evidence thus far suggests that little has been done to ensure this. See also "AMLO Signs off on New Law Allowing Access to Beaches," *Mexico News Daily*, 21 October 21, 2020. <https://mexiconewsdaily.com/news/amlo-signs-off-on-new-law-allowing-free-access-to-all-beaches/>

References

- Azcárate, Matilde Córdoba. 2020. *Stuck with Tourism: Space, Power, and Labor in Contemporary Yucatan*. Oakland: University of California Press.
- Barrera Rojas, Miguel Á. B. 2018. "Pobreza extrema de mujeres indígenas en México. Estudio de caso para la Zona Maya de Quintana Roo." *Ciencia e Interculturalidad* 22 (1): 89–105.
- Bastide, Roger. 1955. "Le principe de coupure et le comportement afro-brésilien." *Anais do XXXL Congresso Internacional de Americanistas* 1: 493–503.
- Butler, Judith. 2011. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York: Routledge.
- Castellanos, M. Bianet. 2010. *A Return to Servitude: Maya Migration and the Tourist Trade in Cancún*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

- Chant, Sylvia. 2002. "Researching Gender, Families and Households in Latin America: From the 20th into the 21st Century." *Bulletin of Latin American Research* 21 (4): 545–75.
- Chesnut, R. Andrew. 2017. *Devoted to Death: Santa Muerte, the Skeleton Saint*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Daltabuit, Magali, and Oriel Pi-Sunyer. 1990. "Tourism development in Quintana Roo, Mexico." *Cultural Survival Quarterly* 14 (1): 9–13.
- Douglas, Mary. 1966. *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*. London: Ark.
- Edensor, Tim. 2001. "Performing Tourism, Staging Tourism: (Re) Producing Tourist Space and Practice." *Tourist Studies* 1 (1): 59–81.
- Ferguson, Lucy. 2011. "Promoting Gender Equality and Empowering Women? Tourism and the Third Millennium Development Goal." *Current Issues in Tourism* 14 (3): 235–49.
- Frazer, James. (1890) 1993. *The Golden Bough: A Study in Comparative Religion*. Herts: Wordsworth Editions.
- Goffman, Erving. 1956. *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. Edinburgh: University of Edinburgh, Social Sciences Research Centre.
- Gracia, María Amalia, and Jorge Enrique Horbath. 2019. "Condiciones de vida y discriminación a indígenas en Mérida, Yucatán, México." *Estudios Sociológicos* 37 (110): 277–307.
- Greenwood, Susan. 2009. *The Anthropology of Magic*. New York: Berg.
- Harris, Marvin. 1964. *The Nature of Cultural Things*. New York: Random House.
- Harris, Marvin. 1976. "History and Significance of the Emic/Etic Distinction." *Annual Review of Anthropology* 5 (1): 329–50.
- Harvey, David. 2006. *Spaces of Global Capitalism: A Theory of Uneven Geographical Development*. London: Verso.
- Hawn, Heather, and Jennifer Tison. 2015. "Tourism and Political Choices of Indigenous Populations in Yucatán." *Latin American Perspectives* 42 (5): 234–47.
- Juárez, Ana M. 2002. "Ecological Degradation, Global Tourism, and Inequality: Maya Interpretations of the Changing Environment in Quintana Roo, Mexico." *Human Organization* 61 (2): 113–24.
- Kingsbury, Kate. 2019. "Supplicating Santa Muerte: Fierce Female Folk Saint as Source of Empowerment for Indigenous Women" March 18. *Global Catholic Review*. Accessed 20 January 2021, <https://www.patheos.com/blogs/theglobalcatholicreview/2019/03/santa-muerte/>.
- Kingsbury, Kate. 2020. "Death is Women's Work: A Folk Saint and Her Female Followers." *International Journal of Latin American Religions* 5: 1–25.
- Kingsbury, Kate. 2021. "Doctor Death and Coronavirus: Supplicating Santa Muerte for Holy Healing." *Anthropologica* 63 (1): 1–23.
- Kingsbury, Kate, and Andrew Chesnut. 2020a. "Not Just a Narcosaint: Santa Muerte as Matron Saint of the Mexican Drug War." *International Journal of Latin American Religions* 4: 25–47.
- Kingsbury, Kate, and Andrew Chesnut. 2020b. "Holy Death in Times of Coronavirus: Santa Muerte, the Salubrious Saint of Mexico." *International Journal of Latin American Religions* 4: 194–217.
- Kingsbury, Kate, and Andrew Chesnut. 2020c. "Santa Muerte: Sainte Matronne de l'amour et de la mort." *Anthropologica* 62: 380–93.
- Kingsbury, Kate, and Andrew Chesnut. 2021. "Syncretic Santa Muerte: Holy Death and Religious Bricolage." *Religions* 12: 212–32.
- McGee, Adam M. 2012. "Haitian Vodou and Voodoo: Imagined Religion and Popular Culture." *Studies in Religion* 41 (2): 231–56.
- Navarrete Linares, Federico. 2004. *Las relaciones interétnicas en México*. México: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México.
- Ortiz, Fernando A., and Kenneth G. Davis. 2008. "Latina/o Folk Saints and Marian Devotions: Popular Religiosity and Healing." In *Latina/o Healing Practices: Mestizo and Indigenous Perspectives*, edited by Brian McNeill, and Jose M. Cervantes, 29–62. New York: Routledge.

- Patenostro, Silvio. 1995. "Mexico as a Narco-democracy." *World Policy Journal* 12 (1): 41–7.
- Pi-Sunyer, Oriel, R. Brooke Thomas, and Magalí Daltabuit. 1999. *Tourism and Maya society in Quintana Roo, Mexico*. Storrs, CT: Center for Latin American & Caribbean Studies. Occasional Paper No. 17.
- Pritchard, Annette, and Nigel J. Morgan. 2000. "Privileging the Male Gaze: Gendered Tourism Landscapes." *Annals of Tourism Research* 27 (4): 884–905.
- Torres, Rebecca, and Janet Momsen. 2005. "Planned Tourism Development in Quintana Roo, Mexico: Engine for Regional Development or Prescription for Inequitable Growth?" *Current Issues in Tourism* 8 (4): 259–85.
- Turner, Victor. 1967. *The Forest of Symbols: Aspects of Ndembu Ritual*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University.