Religion Compass

WILEY

ARTICLE

Visibility and Iconic Aspirations of Santa Muerte Devotion in Mexico

Wil G. Pansters

Utrecht University, Utrecht, the Netherlands

Correspondence: Wil G. Pansters (w.g.pansters@uu.nl)

Received: 11 August 2025 | **Revised:** 2 January 2026 | **Accepted:** 10 February 2026

Keywords: 2000-present | Americas | anthropology | Mexico | Northern America | popular belief | religions in the Americas | ritual | saints

ABSTRACT

This article examines the manifestations and meanings of the spectacularly increased visibility of Santa Muerte devotion in contemporary Mexico. This remarkable development acquires significance against the background of the cult's previous history of concealed devotion. To confront their existential uncertainties and vulnerabilities, present day Santa Muerte devotees engage in a range visual, performative, and spatial practices. Although empirically signaled, hitherto no systematic analysis has been made of the cult's iconic aspirations and its increased public visibility in conceptual terms. To make up for this deficit and deepen our understanding of its meanings, this article explores the theoretical notions of "iconic aspirations" and (the anthropology of) "display." As a key component of popular religion-making, it is important to understand the assemblage of a new visibility regime by the efforts of assorted congregations and their leaders over the course of the past decades. Based on ethnographic material, I show how these range from place-making interventions through the appropriation and sacralization of secular spaces, to the visibilizing effects of commodities, rituals, processions, and human bodies. These practices feature critical bottom-up agency, that explains the cult's religious, iconographic, and expressive dynamics, as well as their profound social, political, and symbolic meanings.

1 | Taking Santa Muerte for a Ride

The Charro Negro is a remarkable appearance in the large port of Veracruz, if you are lucky to encounter him. I wasn't when I visited the city in August 2023, even though I had contacted Alexis Ortíz González who made a photographic essay about him before the outbreak of the Covid-pandemic. The essay shows how the Charro Negro ("Black Horseman"), in his late fifties at the time, spent time driving around his battered pick-up truck carrying a large Santa Muerte statue. Although he also runs a Santa Muerte chapel, he prefers to roam the streets, allegedly because the saint herself doesn't like to be "locked up," and because it enables Santa Muerte to protect disadvantaged and vulnerable residents.[1] The Charro's innovative large "mobile shrine" is a telling and distinctive materialization of the public display and aspirations of this popular religious cult.[2]

Photograph 1

'La carroza de la niña', Veracruz, 2019 © Alexis Ortíz González

© 2026 John Wiley & Sons Ltd.

In this article, I examine diverse manifestations and meanings of the spectacularly increased visibility, or hypervisibility in Huffschmid's words (2019, 125), of Santa Muerte devotion in contemporary Mexico. Its significance is remarkable since during most of the twentieth century Santa Muerte worshiping was hidden from the public eye. During the last quarter of a century, however, things changed drastically. Nowadays, Santa Muerte devotional practices and rituals overwhelmingly take place in private *and* public spaces. The key turning point in this shift is widely believed to be the decision in September 2001 of long-time devotee Enriqueta Romero to place a large Santa Muerte statue outside her house in down-town Mexico City, which eventually evolved into the cult's most well-known street altar. The cult's open-air rosaries also first developed here.[3] While the story of the "accidental" outing of the skeleton saint has become a celebrated chapter in the history and mythology of Santa Muerte devotion, the conceptualization of the remarkable shift in the cult's visibility has received much less attention.[4] To make up for this deficit and deepen our understanding of its meanings, this article explores the theoretical notions of "iconic aspirations" and (the anthropology of) "display." It begins with some general remarks about Santa Muerte devotion, which are followed by reflections on my conceptual perspective and questions. Based mainly on first-hand ethnographic research, carried out during numerous visits between 2015 and 2025, at shrines across Mexico and conversations with dozens of devotees and congregational leaders, I will then examine in some detail the practices and meanings of three modalities of public devotional displays.

2 | Santa Muerte Devotion in a Nutshell

What are the main features of the Santa Muerte cult? First is the peculiar and, for many, disturbing saint's basic iconography of a robed skeleton. The growing size of the cult and its public expansion has been accompanied by a creative explosion of colors, formats, and designs. Today, Santa Muerte devotion presents visual exuberance and symbolic enjoyment, which also explain the broad fascination (and dismay) with the cult. Santa Muerte effigies can be found at street altars and shrines, but most devotees—estimated at 1.5–2 million—possess one or more statues in their homes (Pansters 2025, 56). Many spend considerable time and resources in looking after, adorning, dressing up, and praying to the saint, which in its turn has greatly enhanced her personification and the cultivation of intimate saint-devotee relationships. Despite the sexless skeletal frame, Santa Muerte is an unambiguous female saint.

Photograph 2

Santa Muerte effigy in Alfarería street, Tepito, Mexico City, 2023. Photo by the author.

Although it is possible to speak of a cult in general terms, a second key feature is the absence of a canon, a body of foundational spiritual or programmatic texts common in many other (new) religious denominations or movements (Hammer and Swartz-Hammer 2024, 43–54). Santa Muerte devotion operates above all in a de-centralized manner—spatially, organizationally, politically, aesthetically, and ritually—around particular shrines, congregations, and their leaders. This allows for significant bottom-up agency and religion-making, understood here as processes and practices through which "particular social groups in a subordinate position draw on a religionist discourse to re-establish their identities as legitimate social formations distinguishable from other social formations through tropes of religious difference and/or claims for certain rights" (Mandair and Dressler 2011, 21).

In line with the above, a third notable feature of lived Santa Muerte religiosity is its pragmatism and permeability. Devotees engage in multiple practices of articulation and syncretism rendering "an open cult" (Perrée 2016, 207). In their altars and religious universe, Santa Muerte takes center stage, but often in conversation with other religious figures, including Catholic saints. In a Mexico City shrine, Santa Muerte is flanked by the former bandit turned saint called Jesús Malverde and by Saint Jude Thaddeus. In Veracruz, iconographic and ritual aspects of Cuban Santería have been integrated into the cult (Argyriadis 2014; J. A. Flores Martos 2007), while in southern Mexico it is interwoven with spiritual rituals of indigenous *curanderos* (healers) (Michalik 2011; Kingsbury 2021). The cult's tendency to appropriate, absorb, or devour other saints and religious meanings has hence been typified as "cannibalistic" and as "semiotic voracity" (J. M. Flores Martos 2019, 90; Michalik 2011,

165). The cult's offline and online circulation adds opportunities to blend with other religious icons and systems (cf. Perdigón Castañeda and Robles Aguirre 2019).[5]

Fourth, Santa Muerte popular religiosity is deeply rooted in Mexico's rich religious and cultural past, including its long history of (Catholic) folk saints, shrines, and miraculous images. Santa Muerte rituals, prayers, petitions, and offerings echo those of canonized Catholic saints. The cult draws on skeletal images worshiped in the colonial period, either rooted in medieval Europe or from Mexico itself, as well as on precolonial imaginations of death. In addition, there is the influence of secular skeletal figures, most notable La Catrina, and of the popular and increasingly commodified celebrations of the Day of the Dead. These diverse cultural repertoires are relevant for understanding key iconographic and ritual features of the present-day Santa Muerte cult. Evidence of the cult's alleged uninterrupted existence since (pre-) colonial times is tenuous. In other words, Santa Muerte religion-making from below engages in dialectical relationships with past or hegemonic religious and secular knowledge regimes in the form of acts of emancipation, appropriation, or subversion (Mandair and Dressler 2011, 23).

Fifth, and in line with the previous, devotees consider Santa Muerte a powerful saint and understand her as part of a universe of other folk and canonical saints. At the core of Santa Muerte beliefs and theology lies an exchange mechanism between devotees and the saint, who intercedes before God. The exchange is generally motivated by the "compensatory satisfaction of worldly needs" (Graziano 2016, 16). The key emic term employed by Santa Muerte devotees in prayers is *(des) amparo* (protection, support, and lack/loss of protection). Just as in the case of the Charro Negro in Veracruz, research has found ample evidence of connections between Santa Muerte devotion and precarious livelihoods, ineffective social protections, and insecurity, which encompasses bread-and-butter issues (employment, social mobility), deficient public services (health, education), an arbitrary legal system (impunity, illegal detention), as well as crime and violence. Santa Muerte devotion is not a death cult but about securing a good life.

The Santa Muerte cult is experienced as particularly inclusive by stigmatized and vulnerable groups such as prostitutes, homosexuals, convicts, drug addicts, undocumented migrants, whereas the views of the Catholic church, the mainstream media, and a considerable section of the Mexican middle classes toward the cult are negative. Meanwhile, many devotees continue to identify as Catholics, albeit loosely. In this broader socio-religious context riddled with prejudices, tensions, and hostilities, the public display and aspirations of Santa Muerte congregations acquire particular significance. How can this matter be approached conceptually?

3 | Iconic Aspirations and Display

Some years ago, Knott et al. published a special issue of *Material Religion*, which investigated how "the tangible presence of religion in urban spaces is a fruitful starting point to understand the dynamics of religious diversity" (2016, 128). The focus was mainly on Europe, where migrant and spiritual communities engage with purpose-built or recycled places of worship, often in conversation with the material remnants of the Christian religious past. Since this research considers "the built environment and urban infrastructure as contexts for religious place-making and an opportunity for religious creativity and performance" (Knott et al. 2016, 125), it is pertinent to my research of the public presence and visibility of Santa Muerte devotion. After all, Santa Muerte congregations and devotees have been very active in religious place-making. During the last 25 years, they have made "direct claims either to secure space or to be publicly noticed via representative buildings" or otherwise "to draw the public gaze," that is, striving for "visibility and audibility in urban space" (Knott et al. 2016, 126–127, 129), which Beekers and Tamimi Arab (2016) have called "iconic aspirations." Public shrines and street altars become "invested with a special iconic quality," that is, "the capacity to enshrine and convey a sense of a special, sacrosanct presence to beholders whose acts and attitudes resonate with and reproduce this presence" (Knott et al. 2016, 129). Employing the notions of iconic quality and aspirations can advance our understanding of the public manifestations of Santa Muerte devotion against the background of stereotypical mainstream framings of the cult as associated with crime, drug trafficking, and violence. I argue that Santa Muerte's iconic aspirations are critical for contesting these external framings, while recognizing their relevance for internal community and identity-making.

The materialization of religious iconic qualities and aspirations in and through the built environment can be subsumed in the broader perspective of an "anthropology of display." Building, among others, on Handelman's ([1990] 1998) important work on public events, Swancutt describes the objective of a recent special issue of *Asian Ethnology* as the ethnographic study of the worldmaking qualities of display "through accounts of how spirits, gods, demons, and their ritual props, offerings, effigies, or emblems push at the edges of the social and cosmic order" (2023, 15). The issue's focus is not only on the built environment, but above all on the "transformative powers" of diverse public spectacles, processions, and rituals. These can operate as vehicles for expressing moral ideals, esthetic proposals, and new ways of envisioning human-otherworldly relations (Swancutt 2023, 19). In a fascinating case study, Telle (2023) examines the yearly processions of spectacular and provocative homemade demonic puppets by Hindu Balinese youth on the overwhelmingly Muslim island of Lombok. She shows how these youngster's social and political marginalization as well as the existing ethnoreligious tensions and violence constitute the "impetus to demonstrate their aesthetic prowess," community spirit, and quest for sovereignty. Once a year, as part of the lunar Hindu New Year celebrations, a procession of more than 150 papier-mâché demons exudes an "aspirational and defiant energy," an "outrageous audacity," and a sense of transgressiveness and disorder threatening to unleash potent demonic forces that may destroy human and natural orders (2023, 59, 64). Since the procession of demon puppets purposely engages multireligious audiences, it brings political and worldmaking agendas into the open.

In the following sections, I will take up these conceptual notions to understand the materializations, practices, and meanings of the Santa Muerte cult's current "visibility regime" that was

assembled by the efforts of assorted congregations and their leaders over the course of the past decades (Feuchtwang 2011). I will subsequently examine street altars and shrines, public ceremonies, processions, and tattoos, and comment on their political dimensions.

4 | Shrines and Street Altars

Among the many spaces and places of Santa Muerte devotion, a distinction can be made between private home altars and public shrines, sanctuaries, and street altars.[6] The former are in principle only accessible for individual devotees and their family members, whereas the latter are open for everybody. Although in the real world the boundaries are dynamic, even in a Mexico City prison inmates distinguish between the "private" altars in their cells and the "public" ones in the common spaces and corridors (Yllescas Illescas 2018, 133–138). Both devotional places harbor a remarkable bottom-up driven diversity of Santa Muerte material culture. At public shrines devotees can acquire goods and services and participate in rituals. Many shrine owners organize regular rosaries and yearly festivities, often outdoors.

In generic terms, an altar or a shrine is a consecrated space with objects and images through which human beings can connect with a transcendental entity. It is good to recall that during most of the twentieth century Santa Muerte worshiping was restricted to private spaces and hidden from the public eye. In recent decades, however, Santa Muerte devotional practices and rituals take place in private and public altars, shrines, and chapels, which have massively enhanced the cult's visibility. The materialization of its iconic aspirations has assumed different forms. At a most basic level, places of worship are "publicised" outdoors with painted walls and generic names (such as "Capilla de la Santa Muerte"). In other cases, names contain additional information. Above the entrance of a shrine in San Luis Potosí it reads: "SMI SLP Templo Santa Muerte Vanessa y Charli," in which "SMI" refers to a nationwide congregation (Santa Muerte Internacional), SLP to its regional chapter, and to the names of the shrine managers. Altar walls are often painted in striking colors and illustrated with images of the saint. In many cases, one will also find a human-sized Santa Muerte effigy in a glass display case.

Since the beginning of this century hundreds of public altars have been founded, constructed, and extended by leaders and their followings across Mexico and beyond, bestowing these iconic aspirations with specific religion-making features. Most devotees and scholars agree that Enriqueta Romero's decision in September 2001 to place a huge Santa Muerte statue outside her house in Mexico City constitutes a decisive turning point. When passersby started to leave offerings and candles, the Romero family altar soon transformed into a street altar. Although it wasn't the first street altar, it has become the cult's most iconic one. Between 2001 and 2008 the number of public altars in the greater metropolitan area increased from fewer than 10 to around 300 (Kristensen 2015). Similar developments occurred elsewhere (Leija Parra 2010, 80–82). Since then, the proliferation has expanded. With it emerged an entirely new Santa Muerte visibility regime.

Two basic types of public altars can be identified: the first is an elementary structure at a street corner, the extension of a house, or a market stall; the second is a roofed construction built or accommodated for that purpose, which means that visitors must enter to see the actual effigies. Just like the famous Romero shrine, a good example of the first type is a small street corner altar in the Santo Domingo neighborhood in southern Mexico City. It consists of a 1.5-m-wide glass case that sits on brick base, with some glass and cement adornments to the sides. The case itself is packed with Santa Muerte statues and offerings such as sweets, liquor, and flowers, all grouped around the central skeleton effigy dressed in white. Before the case stands a small prie-dieu. The street corner altar is equipped with camera surveillance.

A more spectacular case of claiming visibility and of carving out a secular urban space for popular religious practices, is the altar constructed by the Congregación Nacional de la Santa Muerte in Ecatepec. In a showcase of materializing "iconic aspirations" over a prolonged period, the leaders of this congregation first placed a Santa Muerte statue on a pedestal underneath a large overpass. Devotees then fenced off the new place of worship with stones and concrete blocks, creating "a circle of divine protection." The altar subsequently expanded to occupy the entire space below the overpass with additional pedestals and statues. In 2018, the overpass pillars were painted in black and "incorporated" into the altar structure. Finally, a tall gold-colored iron fence enclosed what had evolved into a clearly demarcated and publicly recognized sacred urban space, exemplifying the claims and innovative practices of sacred space-making by new religious associations or movements (Tomlinson and Zhu 2025, 1, 2; Huffschmid 2019, 116). The Ecatepec congregation also holds a small indoors space around the corner for private consultations and the sale of esoterica, but collective gatherings take place underneath the giant overpass (Valverde Montaño 2020, 138–142).

Photograph 3

Congregación Nacional de la Santa Muerte shrine, Ecatepec, August, 2023. Photo by the author.

Undoubtedly the most impressive iconic aspiration of visibility is the shrine of the Santa Muerte Internacional congregation in the municipality of Tultitlán, north of Mexico City. Despite efforts by neighbors and the Catholic Church to withhold a building permit, the shrine was established in 2007 on a 20 by 50 m terrain donated by a devotee. Nowadays, it holds a two-story building with offices and a shop, numerous altars with diverse effigies, benches, and murals, but above all a 22 m tall Santa Muerte statue that can be seen from afar. The massive image is made of glass fiber attached to a metal frame. For several years now the image has been painted in gold, but before

it was black, in honor of the congregation's founder Jonathan Legaria's violent death. Its iconic effect is enhanced by the fact that just as Rio de Janeiro's Cristo Redentor, this Santa Muerte holds her arms wide open conveying an image of affability and receptiveness (Higuera Bonfil 2022, 277). Religious services are carried out in front of the statue's broad base (Bigliardi 2015/2016, 82–84). In the context of the opposition to the project, the iconic and esthetic display of the Tultitlán Santa Muerte conveys a sense of cultural and political affirmation.

Photograph 4

Santa Muerte Internacional, Tultitlán, July 2023. Photo by the author.

Buildings expressly accommodated or constructed for the purpose of Santa Muerte devotion have also left their mark on Mexico's socio-religious landscape and enhanced its public presence and visibility. These enclosed sites vary enormously in size and design, but all allow more privacy to devotees. While some scholars have proposed refined categorizations, devotees themselves use the Spanish terms *altar*, *templo*, *santuario* or *capilla* rather randomly (Higuera Bonfil 2018, 406). A *templo* in Guadalajara used to be a warehouse, re-modeled with donations from devotees (Bravo Lara 2013, 22). Since 2005, in the colonial city center of Puebla, the large and neatly decorated "1er Santuario a Dios y a La Santa Muerte" can be reached from the street through a narrow corridor. Before the shrine's leader moved into the worn-out depository and renovated it, he occasionally rented commercial facilities for one day devotional gatherings. At the time, property owners were not keen on renting premises to Santa Muerte congregations on a permanent basis. Today, at the street entrance, a large black signboard and awning with gold lettering make the shrine difficult to miss.[7]

In contrast, the Santa Muerte *santuario* in Ciudad Juárez consists of two separate buildings in a large yard. An imposing black Santa Muerte effigy figure with a scythe protects the small building that houses the shrine's central statue. While still unfinished, during my visit in 2016 the larger building already had stained-glass windows with Santa Muerte motifs. At the desert highway junction of El Huizache in San Luis Potosí, the "Capilla de la Santa" is a five-m-long but narrow rectangular building. Upon entering, a narrow hallway faces a wall covered with Santa Muerte posters and flowers, containing a small niche with a few mid-sized statues. There are two small benches. Not far away, at the other side of Highway 57, the spacious so-called Capilla de la Santa Muerte has a stairway that leads to a high-walled room with a large array of colorful statues of different sizes grouped around a massive seated black Santa Muerte. The shop next door sells offerings and snacks. To underline an already accomplished visibility regime, there is a neat signpost next to the highway indicating the approaching shrine.[8]

5 | Commodities, Rituals, Processions

The iconic aspirations of Santa Muerte not only acquire form in publicly visible and publicized (street) altars and shrines, but in numerous other ways. One often overlooked way is that Santa Muerte images and paraphernalia such as lotion, soap, sprays, trinkets, scapularies, candles, and the like are for sale at specialized stalls in ordinary markets and esoteric shops. Santa Muerte products sell particularly well and are prominently on display. These commodities play a role in communicating and visibilizing the cult, not least because of their iconographic properties. It is unlikely not to find Santa Muerte commodities in any established popular market in Mexico, so their influence in publicly projecting the cult—albeit indirectly—should not be underestimated. Commodities harbor values and meanings.

Photograph 5

Market stall in San Luis Potosí, August 2015. Photo by the author.

Numerous devotional practices and rituals take place at shrines and esoteric market stalls. Some may be individual commercial transactions, while others take the form of collective rituals or festive gatherings. The former include services such as *limpias* (cleansings), healings, and *amarres* or love-bind spells. Occasionally, these practices take place in visible or quasi-enclosed spaces such as in market stalls. The point is that even individual devotional practices are no longer shielded from the public gaze. As a result, they also subtly contribute to the cult's visibility and public display.

Much more prominent in this sense are the rituals or ceremonies in which groups of devotees participate, either in established *templos*, rented spaces or in the street, and for which they use emic terms such as *rosarios*, *fiestas*, *ceremonias* or *misas*. Although collective gatherings around Santa Muerte share key features with domestic rituals, they also "do" other

things. Many devotees, perhaps most, engage in devotional gatherings outside the home, and in addition to individual visits to shrines or street altars. One can distinguish between processions, rosaries, and ceremonies and/or fiestas. The modalities of these three collective gatherings match canonical Catholic ceremonies.

The annual fiestas of quite a few congregations take place at the beginning of November (coinciding with Day of Dead celebrations), but there are also those that stick to the date when a shrine was inaugurated. Festivities of larger congregations not seldomly take place outdoors. Although the combination of prayers, offerings, rituals, dining, live music, singing, and dancing, that is, devotion and enjoyment, suggests that these are hybrid gatherings, organizers and devotees alike experience them above all as fiestas that differ from rosaries, which have become key in the realization of the cult's iconic aspirations and public display. The latter have a shorter duration, but are held regularly, mostly once a month, sometimes weekly. Rosaries at the most well-known shrines, such as the one at Alfarería street in Tepito, may attract more than two thousand devotees, whereas a small one may bring together no more than three dozen. Few scholars will dispute that since the early 2000s the rosary has developed into the central ritual of the Santa Muerte cult both in terms of its devotional and theological content and of its social dimensions of socialization, group-building, identity-making and communicative display. The format and content of Santa Muerte rosaries vary between shrines and congregations and through time, but they tend do so within a certain bandwidth (Pansters 2025, 37–42; Roush 2014).

Participation in collective gatherings allows devotees to experience "private" moments, for example when reflecting on their personal petitions to the saint. Devotees also express devotional individuality through their outfits and the effigies they bring along. During my fieldwork I not only observed the astonishing diversity of effigies in terms of size, designs, adornments, and materials, but also how these attract curiosity and appreciation by cult insiders and outsiders. However, group gatherings and rituals also intervene in and transform the world in other ways (Mancini 2012). This collective agency encompasses what Swancutt (2023) called the display's "worldmaking qualities" that affect human and otherworldly orders. Two aspects can be discerned. The first concerns the formation and experience of congregational group-building, a community of devotees with various social backgrounds and life experiences but who identify with a particular shrine, leader, and their devotional norms and practices. Against the background of the not so remote history of a cult practiced above all individually in secluded spaces community building and festive bonding acquire significance. At the massive street rosaries in Tepito, the public display of abundant Santa Muerte effigies together with those of other popular belief systems such as santería or satanism facilitates cultural conversations (and controversies) about human-supernatural relations and about the theological foundations of Santa Muerte devotion.[9]

A second aspect concerns the political dimension of the construction of Santa Muerte communities in public space. Bringing out statues into the streets, proudly raising them above devotees' heads, blessing them, praying in the street, and carving out urban spaces for Santa Muerte devotion all have the hallmarks of the politics of visibility. Putting an altar in the street, as one scholar put it, is a way of "inhabiting the city," of appropriating public space and saying "here I am and I want you to know it" (Garcés Marrero 2019, 118), and which Tomlinson and Zhu (2025, 18) see as performing and "speaking" places into sacredness. Against the background of stigmatizing media accounts and the physical destruction of altars, material artifacts, public ceremonies, and rituals claim visibility and recognition. As Huffschmid has argued, the public performance of Santa Muerte rituals expresses a claim to "a religious right to the city embodying new forms of citizenship and community" (2019, 116). During the 2000s, a then influential leader of Santa Muerte devotion, David Romo, was the first to organize large public gatherings, marches, and processions, especially after the state revoked his congregation's legal status. In 2005, Romo and thousands of devotees marched to the presidential residence to protest the decision. A few years later, now a with seriously reduced power base, Romo sharply condemned the government for destroying Santa Muerte altars, called upon his followers not to vote for the incumbent party, and denounced the Catholic church (Chesnut 2012, 43–47, 114, 115). He also organized religious processions partly because of a competitive "struggle for visibility and public space" with other congregations and leaders (Garcés Marrero 2020, 180; Perdigón Castañeda 2008, 114–116).[10]

Processions organized by congregations throughout Mexico with devotees carrying personal effigies, pushing carts or driving cars with large statues through the streets loudly proclaiming their allegiance to Santa Muerte are indeed a particularly telling manifestation of the politics of visibility. Since 2005, a major congregation in the city of Puebla has held anniversary processions, which have attracted more and more participants over the years. Congregation members gather at the shrine and then walk several kilometers through the colonial city center passing by the symbolic seats of the Catholic church (cathedral) and the state (city hall), while hundreds shout widely used slogans in honor of Santa Muerte, such as "*Se ve, se siente, la Santa está presente*" (See it, feel it, the Saint is here). In 2019, a procession in Mexico City halted at the immense metropolitan cathedral and the national palace and shouted slogans claiming religious and political rights (Garcés Marrero 2021, 193–197). During the Puebla procession on the November 1, 2025, in which hundreds of devotees participated, I noticed the repeated declaiming of the intrepid slogan "*No que no, sí que sí, ya volvimos a salir; Por mi fé, por mi Santa, ya volvimos a salir*," which roughly translates as "Have no doubts about it, we are out on the street again; Because of my faith, because of my Saint, we are out on the street again." In terms of visibility and audibility, this slogan purposefully expresses and claims the *public* existence of a contentious yet self-confident popular religion. One scholar understands them as counter-performances that confront stigmatization (Huffschmid 2019, 128). These manifestations have not been without effect. The leader of the Puebla shrine recalled that initially the municipal government refused to grant permits for the processions, perhaps urged by the church, but that he and the congregation's devotees took to the streets anyway, rightfully assuming that acting against a religious procession

was politically too risky. With time the situation changed: as the number of devotees increased and the cult materialized its manifold iconic aspirations, the municipality became more cooperative, and the population's skepticism diminished.[11]

Photograph 6

Procession in Puebla, November 2025. Photo by the author.

Public presence, pride, and iconographic exuberance during rosaries, fiestas and processions contest stigmatization and prejudice. It is not difficult to understand public Santa Muerte practices as platforms for a Goffmanian presentation of self and as political interventions in public deliberations. Santa Muerte ceremonies and processions constitute "public events" that are 'locations of communication," and "... phenomena that exist in the lived-in worlds of the participants, and that are [and gradually become, WP] graspable as such by external observers. Their mandate is to engage in the ordering of ideas, people, and things" (Handelman [1990] 1998, 15, 16). As Telle (2023) has shown for the demon processions in Indonesia, the boisterous display of what many perceive as threatening and even transgressive images and sounds underscores its political content.

6 | Bodies and Tattoos

If Santa Muerte shrines and rituals are the materialization of the iconic aspirations of a consolidating cult as well as communicative vehicles for engaging external actors, then the devotee's body is another. After all, the saint's rich iconography in the form of tattoos turns the body into an altar. Many, probably most, devotees bear Santa Muerte tattoos, which are at the same time exceptional means of expressing individualized and intimate devotion and, when visible, crucial mediums to intervene in public space (Gamboa Partida 2010). Once etched on the skin, a tattoo is a durable symbolic sign of one's beliefs. In contrast to most other material artifacts, tattooed devotees always carry Santa Muerte and her protection with them. Who dares to point a knife at the Santa Muerte tattooed on the back of a fellow prisoner? The individualization effect of tattoos is achieved by the fact that a physically embodied icon *qualitate qua* represents a personalized devotee-saint connection. In 2022, a devotee explained to me that a tattoo's design and bodily place could only be meaningful if it had sprouted from the devotee's inner self.[12] Since getting a tattoo is painful, it is also an intimate demonstration of devotional commitment. In addition, getting a Santa Muerte tattoo sets in motion a series of personal and symbolically charged decisions about the tattoo's specific purpose (petition, gratitude, apparition), its esthetic design and size (a winged, imperial, warrior, or Aztec Santa Muerte), and its bodily location (arms, legs, back, etc.) (Perdigón Castañeda and Robles Aguirre 2019). For Blanca, a Santa Muerte tattoo on the side of her lower legs helps to keep her on the right path in life, while a tattoo on the front of Mónica's left arm means she has the saint always at her side (Perdigón Castañeda and Robles Aguirre 2019, 166). The outcome of this chain of individual choices is a vastly diverse universe of Santa Muerte tattoos. More than commercially produced artifacts, tattoos on living bodies exemplify a form of intimate and effervescent devotion that is widely recognized and appreciated within the Santa Muerte community.

Just as the effigies brought along to public ceremonies, the exhibition of tattoos at these events contributes to building community and social identity. What happens during Santa Muerte rituals echoes the tendency among devotee prisoners "... toward sublimation of the image [of the saint, WP], which means proudly exhibiting the stigma, rather than hiding it ...," because it provides protection in the highly insecure Mexican prison world (Lomnitz 2019, 186). The critical importance of tattooing in the Santa Muerte cult "suggests a process wherein a social or personal stigma is willfully transformed into a physically visible stigma, which then operates as a sacred sign" (Lomnitz 2019, 184).

If sublimation and the exaltation of "tribal" identity can be witnessed above all among like-minded people—a form of in-group communication—, tattoos can also be explicitly directed toward external audiences—out-group communication. Devotees themselves decide if and when their Santa Muerte tattoos are visible. Spanish anthropologist J. M. Flores Martos (2019, 84) reported the case of a middle-class urban professional who refused to take off his shirt and join his friends in the pool because he was embarrassed to reveal a Santa Muerte image tattooed on his back. While this episode shows that Santa Muerte devotion is no longer restricted to the popular classes, the out-group communication of a still widely stigmatized and sanctioned saint is conditioned by the expected discriminatory effects. Whereas the urban professional calculated that the costs of discrimination (or disapproval) might threaten his ability to operate in the formal professional job market and middle-class social networks, for others, whose livelihoods don't depend on long-term contractual relationships and who move in different socio-cultural environments, the perceived protective benefits of a permanently visible Santa Muerte tattoo/stigma outweigh the costs. Lomnitz has made the interesting argument that the cult's effective iconic aspirations and its growing public presence "may be due at least in part to the relative decline of long-term, face-to-face work relationships, and to the vibrancy of casual work relationships with multiple clients" (2019, 185; Huffschmid 2019, 132, 133).

If the dynamics of the in-and out-group communication of the Santa Muerte tattoo-stigma-sacred sign has an identity-making as a well as a sociological (work, status) dimension, I would add that the risks of transgressing social and moral boundaries provide their public display with a meaningful cultural and political dimension. Just as the display of demons in Lombok is enacted before multiple audiences, so do Santa Muerte ceremonies and processions, featuring a wide variety of discomforting effigies and tattoos, "demonstrate their aesthetic prowess" to out-groups (Telle 2023, 58). The idiosyncratic personification and sanctification of "death" associated with nether-worldly and dark forces and with danger, risk, and uncertainty bestow upon the public display of Santa Muerte tattoos and effigies its transformative character. In the perceived transgressiveness and potential threat to the dominant social, moral, and religious order resides their "aspirational and defiant" worldmaking political agenda and quest for sovereignty (Telle 2023, 59). Similarly, in the face of precariousness Santa Muerte devotees understand the saint as an independent agent or sovereign able to substitute the state in the realization of social rights (Castells Ballarín 2008; Lomnitz 2005, 483–496).[13]

7 | Concluding Comments

The emergence of Santa Muerte as a burgeoning popular religiosity occurs in part through devotees' visual, performative, and spatial practices to confront existential uncertainties and vulnerabilities. While empirically signaled, in conceptual terms research about Santa Muerte devotion has hitherto insufficiently construed the materialization of the cult's iconic aspirations and its increasing public visibility. Assembling a new visibility regime is a key element in popular religion-making. Because they demand recognition and rights, new popular religious congregations and movements require visibility, often involving "the inversion of the religious world" through the ex- and reappropriation of (formerly) hegemonic religious meanings (Mandair and Dressler 2011; Villamil Uriarte and Cisneros 2011). In the case of Santa Muerte, this acquires further significance against the background of the cult's previous history of concealed devotion. I have demonstrated how this process works by way of different public practices and in different domains, ranging from place-making interventions through the appropriation and sacralization of secular spaces, to the visibilizing effects of commodities, rituals, processions, and human bodies. These practices feature critical bottom-up agency, that accounts for the cult's religious dynamics and its remarkable iconographic and expressive diversity, and their profound political meanings.

While the identity-making, sociological and political dimensions of the public display of Santa Muerte religion-making may reinforce each other, the materialization of the cult's iconic aspirations through the appropriation of public spaces and its diffusion in ceremonies, processions and embodiments has also been accompanied by commodification and mainstreaming. This largely occurs within the Santa Muerte community itself, but the increased visibility and public presence of the cult's central icon also has external effects. The fact that nowadays Santa Muerte effigies can be found among piles of inexpensive tourist trinkets—another object of mortuary "things Mexican"—appears to point to a loss of religious, let alone political, meanings. In the context of the tourist market stall, display is in fact based on the erasure of transgressiveness (Pansters 2025, 70). It remains to be seen if and how this "religious emptying" will transform the cult in the coming years.

Endnotes

[1] Interview with Alexis Ortíz González, Veracruz, August 10, 2023. Years ago, Perdigón Castañeda (2008, 81, 82) mentioned the existence of much smaller "semi-mobile" altars in Mexico City, Santa Muerte images that move around in different means of public transport such as buses and taxis, and on the barrows of street hawkers.

[2] I employ the term "cult"—widely used by Santa Muerte devotees themselves and Mexican and non-Mexican scholars alike, in the descriptive and non-normative sense of Graziano (2007, ix): "a community loosely cohered by belief in a particular folk saint."

[3] See also Lorusso's (2015) impressionistic portrayal of the growth and innovations of public Santa Muerte devotional practices at a few inner Mexico City altars.

[4] Lamrani's (2025) recent study of people's engagements with images of death is a fascinating and sophisticated contribution to how Santa Muerte imagery and devotees' narratives connect manifold social and cultural fields and scales. Its focus on "images" differs from the one employed here: Lamrani examines the saintly figure of Santa Muerte as a lens "to look at other images that share mortality as a common denominator" (2025, 6), such as those of Day of the Dead festivities, films, murals, tattoos and photographs of deceased beloved ones, political martyrs or lethal victims of criminal violence, and how all these constitute and feed from a complex Mexican cultural and political ecosystem around death. See also Lamrani (2022).

[5] It also works the other way around, as Santa Muerte is incorporated into Western esotericism and occultism (Hedenborg-White and Gregorius 2017).

[6] For reasons of space, I will not address Santa Muerte devotion in digital space here.

[7] Interview with Alfonso, Puebla, August 4, 2023.

[8] In contrast, Graf (2023, 77–114) found that Santa Muerte shrines and altars in Los Angeles are torn between intended visibility and effective invisibility or even concealment given continued societal disapproval and stigmatization.

[9] At other Santa Muerte shrines and congregations, the presence of other religious icons or symbols, especially the figure of the devil, would not be tolerated.

[10] For David Romo's tempestuous leadership career, see Pansters. Santa Muerte Devotion, 52–55.

[11] When accompanying its 2025 edition I observed how several municipal police officers made a smooth course of the procession possible by regulating traffic and clearing the streets. I also watched DVDs from the 2018 and 2020 processions of the 1er. Santuario a Dios y La Santa Muerte; interview with Alfonso, Puebla, August 4, 2023.

[12] Interview with Juan Antonio, Mexico City, July 27, 2022.

[13] See also Müller's (2021) fascinating sociological study that researches and theorizes the functionality of Santa Muerte devotion in facing anomie, stigmatization, exclusion, social fragmentation, and precariousness, that is, processes that undermine people's substantive social and human rights.

References

Argyriadis, K. 2014. "Católicos, apostólicos y no-satánicos: Representaciones contemporáneas en México y construcciones locales (Veracruz) del culto a la Santa Muerte." *Culture and Religion* 8, no. 1: 191–218. https://doi.org/10.61303/07184727.v8i1.451.

Beekers, D., and P. Tamimi Arab. 2016. "Dreams of an Iconic Mosque: Spatial and Temporal Entanglements of a Converted Church in Amsterdam." *Material Religion* 12, no. 2: 137–164. https://doi.org/10.1080/17432200.2016.1172760.

Bigliardi, S. 2015/2016. "Si muere el Hijo de la Santa Muerte. The Symbolic Codification of Comandante Pantera's Death at the Temple in Tultitlán (Mexico)." *Studi Tanatologici-Thanatalogical Studies-Études Thanatologiques* 8: 70–91.

Bravo Lara, B. 2013. "Bajo tu manto nos acogemos: Devotos a la Santa Muerte en la Zona Metropolitana de Guadalajara." *Nueva Antropología* 26: 11–28.

Castells Ballarín, P. 2008. "La Santa Muerte y la cultura de los derechos humanos." *LiminaR. Estudios Sociales y Humanísticos* 6, no. 1: 13–25.

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

Feuchtwang, S. 2011. "Exhibition and Awe: Regimes of Visibility in the Presentation of an Emperor." *Journal of Material Culture* 16, no. 1: 64–79. https://doi.org/10.1177/1359183510394942.

Flores Martos, J. A. 2007. "La Santísima Muerte en Veracruz, México: Vidas descarnadas y prácticas encarnadas." In *Etnografías de la muerte y las culturas en América Latina*, edited by J. Flores Martos and L. Abad González, 273–304. Universidad Castilla-La Mancha.

Flores Martos, J. M. 2019. "Dances of Death in Latin America: Holy, Adopted, and Patrimonialized Dead." In *La Santa Muerte in Mexico: History, Devotion & Society*, edited by W. G. Pansters, 84–110. University of New Mexico Press.

Gamboa Partida, E. 2010. *El Tatuaje de la Santa Muerte en el Barrio de Tepito de la Ciudad de México. Acción e intervención en el espacio público mediante procesos plásticos contemporáneos*. Unpublished Master thesis, UNAM.

Garcés Marrero, R. 2019. "La Santa Muerte en la Ciudad de México: Devoción, vida cotidiana y espacio público." *Revista Cultura & Religión* 13, no. 2: 103–121. https://doi.org/10.4067/S0718-47272019000200103.

Garcés Marrero, R. 2020. "La institucionalización del culto de la Santa Muerte: El caso de la Iglesia Católica Tradicional (ICT)." *Revista de El Colegio de San Luis* X, no. 21: 5–27. https://doi.org/10.21696/rcs/10212020125.

Garcés Marrero, R. 2021. *'Muerte querida de mi corazón … ' La articulación del culto a la Santa Muerte con otras espiritualidades: Estudio en el Valle de México*. Unpublished PhD thesis, Universidad Iberoamericana.

Graf, C. 2023. *Devotion in the Making: An Ethnography of the Veneration of La Santa Muerte in Los Angeles*. Unpublished PhD thesis, Universität Leipzig.

Graziano, F. 2016. *Miraculous Images and Votive Offerings in Mexico*. University of New Mexico Press.

Hammer, O., and K. Swartz-Hammer. 2024. *New Religious Movements and Comparative Religion*. Cambridge University Press.

Handelman, D. [1990] 1998. *Models and Mirrors. Towards an Anthropology of Public Events*. Berghahn Books.

Hedenborg-White, M., and F. Gregorius. 2017. "The Scythe and the Pentagram: Santa Muerte From Folk Catholicism to Occultism." *Religions* 8, no. 1: 1–14. https://doi.org/10.3390/rel8010001.

Higuera Bonfil, A. 2018. "La parca en mi casa: Altares domésticos a la Santa Muerte." In *Sostenibilidad y desarrollo humano: Una reflexión desde las ciencias sociales y las humanidades*, edited by M. Jiménez Márquez and V. Cantero Flores, 403–441. Universidad del Caribe.

Higuera Bonfil, A. 2022. "Santa Muerte Internacional: Institucionalizar una devoción." In *México, tierra de misiones. Pasado y presente de las dinámicas espirituales*, edited by I. G. Fierro Reyes, 259–296. Editorial UPNECH.

Huffschmid, A. 2019. "La Santa Muerte as Urban Staging. Notes on the Images and Visibility of a Transgressive Performance." In *La Santa Muerte in Mexico: History, Devotion & Society*, edited by W. G. Pansters, 111–135. University of New Mexico Press.

Kingsbury, K. 2021. "At Death's Door in Cancun: Sun, Sea, and Santa Muerte." *Anthropology and Humanism* 46, no. 2: 244–265. https://doi.org/10.1111/anhu.12333.

Knott, K., V. Krech, and B. Meyer. 2016. "Iconic Religion in Urban Space." *Material Religion* 12, no. 2: 123–136. https://doi.org/10.1080/17432200.2016.1172759.

Kristensen, R. A. 2015. "La Santa Muerte in Mexico City: The Cult and Its Ambiguities." *Journal of Latin American Studies* 47, no. 3: 543–566. https://doi.org/10.1017/s0022216x15000024.

Lamrani, M. 2022. "The Ultimate Intimacy: Death and Mexico, an Anthropological Relation in Images." *American Ethnologist* 49, no. 2: 204–220. https://doi.org/10.1111/amet.13075.

Lamrani, M. 2025. *The Intimacy of Images. Saints, Death, and Devotion to La Santa Muerte in Oaxaca*. University of Texas Press.

Leija Parra, R. A. 2010. *El Culto a la Santa Muerte en la capital de San Luis Potosí: Causas de su práctica*. Unpublished Bachelor thesis, Universidad Autónoma de San Luis Potosí.

Lomnitz, C. 2005. *Death and the Idea of Mexico*. Zone Books.

Lomnitz, C. 2019. "Afterword: Interpreting La Santa Muerte." In *La Santa Muerte in Mexico: History, Devotion & Society*, edited by W. G. Pansters, 183–191. University of New Mexico Press.

Lorusso, F. 2015. "Santa Muerte, blanca Niña Bonita." *La Jornada Semanal*, November 1. https://www.jornada.com.mx/2015/11/01/sem-fabrizio.html.

Mancini, S. 2012. "Sobrevivir con la Muerte: Ecología de una práctica 'pagana' en el valle de México." *Artelogie* 2. https://doi.org/10.4000/artelogie.7648.

Mandair, A. S., and M. Dressler. 2011. "Introduction: Modernity, Religion-Making, and the Postsecular." In *Secularism and Religion-Making*, edited by A. S. Mandair and M. Dressler, 3–36. Oxford University Press.

Michalik, P. G. 2011. "Death With a Bonus Pack: New Age Spirituality, Folk Catholicism, and the Cult of Santa Muerte." *Archives de Sciences Sociales des Religions* 153: 159–182. https://doi.org/10.4000/assr.22800.

Müller, S. 2021. *La Santa Muerte-Leben mit den Tod: Eine Soziologie der Verehrung*. Transcript.

Pansters, W. G. 2025. *Santa Muerte Devotion. Vulnerability, Protection, Intimacy*. Cambridge University Press.

Perdigón Castañeda, J. K. 2008. *La Santa Muerte. Protectora de los hombres*. UNAM.

Perdigón Castañeda, J. K., and B. Robles Aguirre. 2019. "Devotion That Goes Skin Deep: Tattoos of La Santa Muerte." In *La Santa Muerte in Mexico: History, Devotion & Society*, edited by W. G. Pansters, 158–182. University of New Mexico Press.

Perrée, C. 2016. "La iconografía de la Santa Muerte: Antropología de una imagen abierta." In *La Santa Muerte. Espacios, Cultos y Devociones*, edited by A. Hernández Hernández, 207–227. El Colegio de la Frontera Norte/El Colegio de San Luis.

Roush, L. 2014. “Santa Muerte, Protection and Desamparo: A View From a Mexico City Altar.” Supplement, *Latin American Research Review* 49, no. S1: 129–148. https://doi.org/10.1353/lar.2014.0064.

Swancutt, K. 2023. “Demons and Gods on Display. The Anthropology of Display and Worldmaking.” *Asian Ethnology* 82, no. 1: 3–23. https://www.jstor.org/stable/48735845.

Telle, K. 2023. “Displaying Demons. Processions at the Crossroads in Multireligious Indonesia.” *Asian Ethnology* 82, no. 1: 45–71. https://www.jstor.org/stable/48735847.

Tomlinson, M., and . Y. Zhu. 2025. *Making Places Sacred. New Articulations of Place and Power*. Cambridge University Press.

Valverde Montaño, J. 2020. “Diecisiete años de la Congregación Nacional de la Santa Muerte en Ecatepec, Estado de México. Cuicuilco.” *Revista de Ciencias Antropológicas* 77: 131–157. https://revistas.inah.gob.mx/index.php/cuicuilco/article/view/16152.

Villamil Uriarte, R., and J. Cisneros. 2011. “De la Niña Blanca y la Flaquita, a la Santa Muerte (Hacia la inversión del mundo religioso).” *El Cotidiano* 169: 29–38.

Yllescas Illescas, J. A. 2018. *Ver, oír y callar: Creer en la Santa Muerte durante el encierro*. UNAM.