Death Welcomes Everyone

Santa Muerte (Holy Death or Saint Death) is the female personification of death. This powerful and mysterious folk saint provides blessings including safe passage to the afterlife. Santa Muerte is the patron saint of those who live on the fringes of society, as well as those who face violence and death. She is hailed as a potent and powerful guardian and protector. Death is the great equalizer, and Santa Muerte potentially grants miracles to anyone and everyone.

Santa Muerte is a complete ritual guide to working with this famous—and infamous!—Mexican folk saint. Go beyond the sensational headlines to discover the truth about why Santa Muerte is so beloved by so many. Author Tracey Rollin presents simple, straightforward methods for working with Holy Death that may be used alone or easily incorporated into your own magical practice.

“Tracey Rollin’s very well written book Santa Muerte: The History, Rituals, and Spells of Our Lady of the Holy Death avoids a dogmatic approach to Santa Muerte. The author, who hails from New Mexico, where Doña Sebastiana, Lady Death, presaged Santa Muerte, incorporates more research on Santa Muerte than other books aimed at devotees.”

—Professor R. ANDREW CHESNUT, author of Devoted to Death: Santa Muerte, the Skeleton Saint

Santa Muerte Niki Reja
Niki Reja, my Saint of Strength,
Your power knows all,
Laying bare the secrets of life and death,
Of warnings and of cures.
Santa Muerte, my red-stained saint,
I seek that courage which knowing death can bring.
Please lend me your power and your strength.
Giving aid to my people,
And giving me the strength to face
Both my enemies and my fears.
Niki Reja, your power is vast,
And your force is mighty.
Please lend me your power and your power now.
Amen.
Santa Muerte Niña Blanca

Santa Muerte, Blessed White Sister
Come give me your aid and your mercy
And cover me with your mantle of protection.
Keep me safe from harm and
hidden from my enemies
And free from the curses and evil intentions.
For now and always, my blessed White Sister,
I believe in and rely upon your power.
Santa Muerte, please come and cover me with
your mantle of protection now.
Amen.
Chapter I

Introducing Santa Muerte, the Skeletal Lady of Mexico

Who Is Santa Muerte?

Santa Muerte, or “Holy Death” in Spanish, is a folk saint who is believed to be the feminine embodiment of death. Her modern form comes to us from Mexico, where she is styled as a female Grim Reaper figure. She is often depicted as a skeleton wearing a long robe and carrying a scythe, but with added feminine features such as jewelry, flowers, and flowing hair. Her devotees describe her as a warm, friendly, and convivial spirit who is delighted by the antics of the living and who enjoys interacting with them.

Santa Muerte has power over everything that can be touched by death and decay, which gives her an incredibly broad scope of influence. Since life flowers before it fades, Santa Muerte cures illnesses and addiction. Since fortunes can quickly change, she showers her devotees with money and prosperity and untangles legal problems. She also provides ironclad protection from harm, cutting short with her scythe the curses and maledictions of
others. Because death touches on everything, her knowledge and wisdom are unparalleled. She empowers her devotees to deepen their understanding and strengthen their creativity; like necessity, mortality is the mother of invention. Because death touches everyone, she may also throw open the doors of social influence as well as attract a wide variety of lovers. Santa Muerte holds the keys to the underworld as well as other planar realms, and she may unlock their gates to allow communication with spirits of the dead as well as other entities. Since death and dying both have the power to transform your consciousness, Santa Muerte is also a powerful patron spirit of magic. She may assist in shaping and empowering the consciousness of devotees, deepening their wisdom, strengthening their willpower, and expanding their awareness. These three things translate to increased magical power, making Santa Muerte the natural ally of both witches and magicians.

Even this is not an exhaustive list of Santa Muerte’s broad portfolio of powers. Because she is the face of death incarnate, her capacity to act is limited only by her devotees’ capacity to ask. It is deeply ingrained within many of us to openly deny what we really want because we are afraid of being viewed as greedy, sinful, or cynical.

For example, many people ask spirits for help with winning money in the lottery. Often these requests are filled with promises to use the winnings to help the less fortunate, such as giving large sums of money to charity. If this is done honestly as a form of spiritual bribery, it can be quite effective. Some spirits respond well to being paid for their services, such as with charitable donations made publicly in their name. However, making such promises to simply mask your greed will actually have two different effects. First, spirits tend not to respond well to deception. Not
only is being deceptive itself very rude, but you are also telling the spirits that you think they are stupid enough to be deceived. Since no one likes being insulted, spirits will respond poorly—if at all.

Second, making such promises also weakens the power of your request, since you are wasting time and energy trying to convince a spirit that you truly desire to donate millions to charity when actually you don’t. Since this attempt will fail anyway, making these kinds of false promises is an ultimately self-defeating practice. Many people try these tactics because we believe that friendly and helpful spirits will not help a person whose desire to win the lottery is rooted in greed, as greed is thought to be destructive and evil. The kind of spirit that would fulfill such a request is often not the kind of spirit that many people would choose to ask for help.

Santa Muerte is notable because she is not concerned with the underlying motivations driving the requests of her devotees. She assigns no particular moral weight to any kind of request, because, to death, everything is a zero-sum game. Whether you dedicate your lottery winnings to feeding the homeless or to retiring to a beach in Fiji, you will still die in the end. Therefore, Santa Muerte is far more likely to respond to a greedy but heartfelt request than one that is diluted by fake feelings of altruism. Because she is so nonjudgmental, her willingness to intervene is limited only by her devotees’ willingness to ask for her help. Because she assigns no moral weight to any kind of request, her response also extends to using her power to harm other people. This has led to Santa Muerte’s condemnation by religious and civil authorities and to her followers often being considered suspect.

It is the destructive side of Santa Muerte that has helped her garner so much attention in recent years. The US Federal
Bureau of Investigation labels Santa Muerte as a “narco-saint” that is idolized by drug traffickers; it blames her cults for shocking acts of violence and ritual slayings committed on both sides of the US–Mexico border. Cults dedicated to Santa Muerte frequently operate within drug cartels because it is believed that she will grant their members supernatural protection and aid. The media often sensationalizes stories of her statues found in graveyards and at roadsides, apparently left there as components of spells designed to harm specific targets. Her veneration is not condoned by the Catholic Church. In fact, the Catholic Church condemns Santa Muerte as a Satanic figure.

To the police, the appearance of Santa Muerte at a crime scene presents a dark omen indeed. During an interview with a law enforcement official from New Mexico, I was told about a local drug bust conducted by the US Drug Enforcement Administration. While raiding a cartel compound, the agents found an entire room turned into a temple dedicated to the worship of Santa Muerte. The main feature of the temple was a Santa Muerte “statue” made out of a female skeleton wearing an elaborate black silk wedding dress. The official explained to me the primary reason that authorities fear Santa Muerte cults and thus specifically target them for eradication. It’s not that they fear supernatural repercussions. What they fear is how reckless and violent drug traffickers can become when they believe they have supernatural protection. Such a criminal is incredibly dangerous and capable of anything. In an attempt to curb cartel violence, the Mexican military specifically targets Santa Muerte shrines for demolition in an attempt to demoralize drug cartel members. Even if the authorities do not believe in Santa Muerte, they are forced to respect her power.
Santa Muerte’s official condemnation has done little to slow her meteoric rise in popularity. Interest in Santa Muerte has exploded in recent years, fueled by increased immigration and sensationalized media reports linking her to the activities of drug trafficking cartels. This increased exposure has helped Santa Muerte successfully transition from being a mere folk saint to being a virtual pop culture icon.

For example, in the popular television series Breaking Bad, the season three episode “No Más” opens with two cartel assassins belly-crawling through a dusty village to pray at a Santa Muerte shrine. She has also been featured in the popular television series American Horror Story, Criminal Minds, and Dexter, among others. The character of La Muerte in The Book of Life, a 2014 movie, appears to be based on her.

Her image adorns virtually every kind of product imaginable, from ashtrays to gun grips to wall hangings, and the market is enormous. Since the emergence of her first public shrine at Tepito, Mexico, in 2001, the number of Santa Muerte devotees in the world has increased dramatically, currently numbering between ten and twelve million worldwide. In fact, belief in Santa Muerte is the fastest-growing new religious movement emerging in the world today.¹

Where Does Santa Muerte Come From?
The veneration of Santa Muerte comes to us from Mexico, where she is publicly celebrated as the patron saint of the Day of the Dead. Mexico is a predominantly Catholic country. Catholics

believe in a wide variety of saints. Saints are spiritual personalities who are believed to have an especially close relationship with God. Catholics pray to saints because they can use this special relationship to intercede in the lives of people. The Catholic Church recognizes over 1,500 official saints with new ones canonized annually. To become a saint, a deceased person must meet certain criteria, such as performing a number of miracles that can be directly attributed to him or her. Only after a lengthy investigation by a Vatican commission may a person be canonized and added to the official roll of Catholic saints.

However, the Catholic Church does not accept all saints. There are many saints whose ability to perform miracles is acclaimed by popular belief, but they have not been vetted by a Vatican commission. These kinds of saints are called “folk saints.” Despite their unofficial status, the Catholic Church tends to tolerate their veneration alongside the veneration of the official Catholic patrons.

One such example is the folk saint La Difunta Correa (“the Deceased Correa”), who enjoys a cult over two hundred thousand members strong in Argentina, Chile, and Uruguay. La Difunta Correa is believed to be the spirit of a woman who took her infant child on a mission to rescue her husband in the 1840s; however, she became lost in the desert and died of thirst before she could reach him. Eventually, some ranchers found her body and discovered that her baby was still alive because he was able to feed from her eternally full breast. Considering this to be a miracle, the ranchers buried her body and told many other people about it. Soon La Difunta Correa’s gravesite became a shrine. Today she is venerated as a patron saint of cattle drivers, travelers, and small children. Her devotees bring her gifts of water
to slake her eternal thirst. La Difunta Correa is classified as a folk saint because she is not recognized by the Catholic Church, despite the popularity of her cult.

Santa Muerte is also venerated as a folk saint. Because death is the great equalizer, Santa Muerte is the patron saint of marginalized people who live on the fringes of society, many of whom suffer from rejection by the mainstream culture. These people include not only the working poor, but also criminals, drug addicts, gay people, prostitutes, single mothers, the homeless, and the mentally ill. She is also often considered the patron saint of people who work at night, such as taxi drivers, bartenders, exotic dancers, and after-hours cleaning and maintenance staff. These types of workers are at higher risk for accidents, assaults, robberies, and all types of violent death specifically because they work at night. Santa Muerte is often called Senora de la Noche (Spanish, “Lady of the Night”) because believers hope that she will protect them from these types of calamities. Since people who live on the fringes of society often feel that they have nowhere else to turn, Santa Muerte is sometimes also called the Saint of Last Resort.

The Different Names of Santa Muerte

Santa Muerte enjoys a large number of titles bestowed on her by her devotees. Following is a list of some of her more common ones, along with a brief explanation of each. Several of them bear a marked similarity to each other, so they are grouped together. Please note that none of these titles
refer to a specific color aspect of Santa Muerte, but to Santa Muerte in general.

**Holy Death:** The literal translation of “Santa Muerte” into English is Holy Death.

**Our Lady of the Holy Death:** Some believe that a strong relationship exists between Santa Muerte and the Virgin Mary. This title is a play on the name of one of the most popular versions of the Virgin Mary named “Our Lady of Guadalupe.”

**Pretty Girl:** Santa Muerte’s natural vibrancy is sometimes expressed through a girlish attitude. She is often called pretty, among other things, to flatter and impress her.

**Queen of Death/Saint of Death:** These two popular titles subtly imply the great overarching power that Santa Muerte possesses, as even the official Catholic saints overseeing death only manage steps in the process of dying, not the entire experience (more on this in chapter 3).

**Saint of Last Resort:** Because so many people find calling on death to be an act of desperation, Santa Muerte is sometimes called the Saint of Last Resort.

**Senora de la Noche** (*Spanish,* “Lady of the Night”): Santa Muerte is thought to be the patron of those who work at night and are at increased risk of violence and death for it.

**Skeletal Lady/Skeletal Saint/Skinny Girl:** Many titles of Santa Muerte refer to her thin and skeletal appearance.

**Sister/Mother Death/Bone Mother:** These popular terms usually refer to the gentler and more caring faces of Santa Muerte.
White Sister/Lady/Mother—These terms that call Santa Muerte white do not refer to her actual color, but to the states of newness and purity that she can create instead.

Unlike La Difunta Correa, however, Santa Muerte does not enjoy the passive acceptance of the Catholic Church. In fact, the Church outright condemns veneration of Santa Muerte as a Satanic practice. The Catholic Church already has several official saints that are devoted to death, such as Saint Margaret of Antioch and Saint Michael, so there is no need for Santa Muerte to fulfill that role.

Another thing that bars Santa Muerte from being tolerated is that some of her devotees engage in illegal activities and practice black magic. Since Santa Muerte is the patron saint of criminals and those who are at risk of nighttime violence, many drug traffickers hail her as their personal patron and use spells and rituals to ensure their protection and success. While similar activity is sometimes performed in the name of Saint Jude, who is the patron saint of lost causes, this type of activity is frowned on at best and often condemned as Satanic. The criminal behavior of some of Santa Muerte’s devotees makes it difficult for her cult to gain the acceptance and tolerance that the cults of other folk saints enjoy.

As drug-related violence continues to escalate on both sides of the US–Mexico border, Santa Muerte cults associated with the drug trafficking cartels are blamed for murders allegedly conducted in order to curry her favor. Some of her cults have even been accused of engaging in ritual cannibalism! This behavior has
caused Santa Muerte to become inextricably linked in the minds of many with violent slayings conducted to fuel black magic, leading to her condemnation as a Satanic figure. Despite the fact that these devotees would likely describe themselves as devout Catholics and Santa Muerte herself as being in league with God, these types of activities are understandably repulsive to the Catholic Church. Since the Catholic Church has no need to add an additional saint to its official register, especially one who is associated with violent criminals who practice black magic, the Catholic Church continues to denounce Santa Muerte as a Satanic figure.

Traditionally, veneration of Santa Muerte has been a private practice, partially because of condemnation by civil and religious authorities and partially because of the negative connotations associated with her worship. Because of the strong Catholic influence, Mexico also has strong cultural taboos against using witchcraft, especially for malign purposes. People who use witchcraft risk social ostracism or worse, as it is often equated with malevolence. Many perceive turning to the power of Death itself for aid as an act of desperation.

The Mexican government, like the Catholic Church, tends to tolerate the veneration of folk saints. There is even one folk saint, El Niño Fidencio, whose veneration has spawned its own offshoot religion called the Fidencista Christian Church with its own liturgy and church hierarchy. This church was founded in 1993, and its membership continues to grow to this day. Santa Muerte enjoys no such unofficial tolerance, however. Her first public shrine did not open until 2001 in Tepito, Mexico. The Mexican government continues to refuse to recognize the movement as an official religion, citing concerns that doing so would only legitimize veneration of Santa Muerte in the eyes of the
drug cartels. Thus, there is no “official” Santa Muerte cult or religion with a standardized body of prayers or ritual practice.

Although the Catholic Church has condemned the veneration of Santa Muerte, this has not prevented her from becoming the unofficial patron saint of the annual Day of the Dead celebration in Mexico. The Day of the Dead, or Dia de los Muertos, is a national holiday when the souls of the dead are thought to return to enjoy the pleasures of life as well as the closeness of family and friends. Rather than a somber occasion, the Day of the Dead is intended to be a bright and jubilant one. People gather to celebrate the spirits of their deceased loved ones and the lives that they lived. This celebration is not only believed to strengthen the bonds of family but is also an opportunity to ask the dead for their assistance and protection. Cleaning and tending graves is a common activity as well, with many people leaving flowers, food, and other gifts for the dead to enjoy.

In many Catholic countries during religious festivals, the icons of cherished saints are removed from their shrines and paraded around streets and public squares so that they receive the adoration of the faithful. Because Mexico is a predominantly Catholic country and Santa Muerte is hailed as a folk saint, she enjoys the same treatment that the other saints receive. The Day of the Dead is held on November 2, which coincides with All Souls’ Day—a Catholic religious holiday when the faithful pray for the souls of their dearly departed dead. On the Day of the Dead, the Saint of Death makes her celebrated public appearance. Her statues are arrayed in richly embroidered robes and covered with garlands of flowers before being taken out of their shrines and paraded throughout town. Many such processions end in the local graveyard, often with much singing and dancing.
The Day of the Dead celebration is rooted in a much older religious festival that was celebrated by the Aztecs. When the Spanish arrived in 1519, the Aztecs dominated the Valley of Mexico. The Aztecs celebrated several of their gods of death and sacrifice during their end-of-year harvest festivals. They also celebrated the memories of their own dead, often equating butterflies or moths with the returning souls of family and friends. One deity celebrated during these festivals was the goddess Mictecacihuatl, the Lady of Mictlan.

Mictlan is the Aztec underworld, a dark and dangerous place that the dead had to navigate to find her fortress to await their eventual rebirth. When the Spanish converted the Aztecs to Catholicism, the native population refused to stop the veneration of their dead. Eventually, the Catholic priests yielded—they were able to compromise by moving the calendar date of the Aztec festivals to coincide with All Souls’ Day. In this way, elements of those ancient Aztec festivals survived to become the modern Day of the Dead celebrations.

The goddess Mictecacihuatl is frequently cited as a mythic source of Santa Muerte, although some scholars point out that it is unclear why this particular deity was elevated out of the many available Aztec gods of death and sacrifice. Despite this argument, many devotees consider belief in this origin story to be a matter of cultural and ethnic pride, since an Aztec origin creates a tangible connection to Mexico’s pre-Spanish past.

Many scholars and devotees point out that the idea of a female death figure was also not unknown to the Spanish who colonized Mexico. In the 14th century, a great plague known as the Black Death decimated Europe, killing 30 to 60 percent of the population. As survivors tried to cope with the horror of
so much widespread death, their cultural focus turned toward themes of dying, resurrection, and penitence. It also evoked a strong desire for a gentle and peaceful death. The idea of a Grim Reapress arose, a feminine face of death who would deliver such gentle and peaceful endings. The term and spelling “Grim Reapress” first appeared in *Devoted to Death* by R. Andrew Chesnut.

The Spanish recognized this figure within their culture, referring to her as *La Parca* (Spanish, “the parched one”). Europe’s population did not recover its 14th-century population levels until the 17th century, two hundred years after the Spanish arrived in Mexico. Thus, the concept of La Parca was still vibrant and relevant within Spanish culture when they established their colonies. Since Santa Muerte takes the form of a female Grim Reaper, in the same way as La Parca, many devotees cite this as evidence that Santa Muerte’s roots are European instead.

Although these two theories are the dominant ones concerning the origins of the Saint of Death, they are not the only ones. The decentralized nature of Santa Muerte’s veneration has given rise to a number of alternative theories of origin for the Saint of Death that draw less support but are believed just as sincerely by those who have adopted them. One such myth is that Santa Muerte is the elevated soul of a beautiful woman who committed suicide after being rejected by her lover. God denied her entry into Heaven because she committed suicide but took pity on her by giving her the task of collecting the souls of the dead instead of consigning her to Hell. This is why Santa Muerte is believed to have such a sympathetic and loving nature. This theory also makes it possible for Santa Muerte to have personally collected the soul of Jesus Christ, a fervent belief of some of her devotees,
but which makes little sense if Santa Muerte first arose in Aztec Mexico or late medieval Europe instead.

Another theory of origin places Santa Muerte’s roots in Africa. When Yoruba slaves were brought to the Americas, they brought their religious beliefs with them, which eventually emerged as the African ritual traditions, Palo Mayombé, San- teria, and Vodou. Since some traditional Santa Muerte prac- tices closely resemble African ritual traditions, some devotees of Santa Muerte contend that she is related to one of the many African goddesses of cemeteries and rebirth.

In Santeria, the African-diaspora tradition of Cuba, two orishas (powers), who are both goddesses, are associated with death:

* The orisha Yewa is the goddess of the underworld, who is charged with bringing the bodies of the dead to Oya.

* The orisha Oya is the goddess of cemeteries, as well as storms and rebirth.

Palo Mayombé, an African-diaspora tradition also arising in Cuba, has a deity or spirit named Centella Endoki, who is similar to Oya, as is Maman Brigitte, a spirit of Haitian Vodou.

Since Yoruba slaves were brought to Mexico as well as the Caribbean, believers in this origin theory of Santa Muerte cite it as the opportunity for yet another patroness of cemeteries to emerge as a result of the African diaspora.

These are just two additional alternative theories of Santa Muerte’s origin. The decentralized nature of Santa Muerte’s cult has allowed for many different myths to proliferate. Although Santa Muerte’s modern face is undoubtedly Mexican in origin, her
diverse roots make it easy for anyone to relate to her in a manner closer to the cultural perspective in which they were raised.

For example, my mother is a Catholic immigrant from Germany. When I was a little girl, I learned from her about a friendly Norse goddess of the underworld named Hela. This goddess was supposed to be very lovely, except that half of her face was an exposed skull. Her divine duty was to care for the souls of the gently departed dead, which included women, children, and the elderly. This story became part of my personal cultural perspective and mythological makeup, as much as the Catholic saints that my mother also taught me to venerate.

Although I grew up in New Mexico, I did not learn about Santa Muerte until I was an adult. Even so, I found it easy to accept the idea of a friendly and beautiful skeletal lady saint because she reminded me so strongly of the stories of Hela that I had learned as a child. While my route to the veneration of Santa Muerte may have been an unusual one, it is a striking testament to the universal appeal that the Saint of Death holds. Once stitched together, the many different devotees of Santa Muerte make an interesting and varied fabric indeed.

San la Muerte

San la Muerte is another major Latin American spiritual being associated with death. Similar to Santa Muerte, his name or title also translates as “Holy Death” from Spanish, albeit in a male-gendered form. San la Muerte, who is also portrayed as a black-robed skeleton with a scythe and an owl, is venerated in Paraguay, Argentina, and parts of Brazil.

The roots of San la Muerte are murkier than those of some other popular Latin American folk saints who are associated with
death—for example, La Difunta Correa, who was discussed earlier and who is reputedly the spirit of a woman who died in the 1840s; or Miguel Ángel Gaitán, who died fifteen days before his first birthday in 1967 and whose incorruptible body lies encased within its glass tomb in Chilcito, Argentina.

There are two competing origin stories for San la Muerte. One myth is that he was a particularly powerful curandero, an herbalist and mystical healer, who received his great ability from his devotion to Jesus Christ. After his death, this holy man’s spirit persisted to help others. His cult elevated him to the position of Grim Reaper, believing that his position on the other side of death’s veil allows him to see into the hearts of the living, and so he is capable of judging them. This version of the story creates him as initially both male and mortal, granted great power only because of his extreme dedication to his faith. This is very different from the origin stories of Santa Muerte, which almost exclusively describe her as being the face of a fundamental and universal power and therefore not the elevated soul of anyone in particular.

The other myth explaining the origin of San la Muerte is much more interesting. After Jesuit missionaries converted the Guarani Indians of Paraguay, Argentina, and Brazil, they began to receive abundant offerings of gold and jewels. The Guarani also labored to build numerous churches throughout the region.

The legend goes that not all of the Guarani truly adopted the foreign God of the Jesuits. To continue their own practices in secret, they gave to the Jesuits a great carved statue of Jesus Christ, the Devil, and Death done in a native style. They included within the elaborate carvings symbols of their patron gods and spirits, hiding them right under the priests’ noses. The statue was reputedly carved out of the heart of a palo santo (Spanish, “holy wood”)
The palo santo tree grows throughout Central and South America and is popularly believed to attract beneficial spirits and drive off malignant ones. It has particular significance for the Guarani, who believe that trees possess great power to affect human beings because their gods had created the foundations of the world from special woods. Palo santo was favored for the most powerful or significant carvings because the wood of this spirit-attracting tree was thought to enhance the carving’s power.

When the king of Spain grew jealous of the accumulated riches of the Jesuits, he sent troops to burn their foreign churches. This paved the way for a native rebellion. The Guarani stole the statue before the advancing Spanish forces could destroy it. They broke it up into three pieces and hid them, their locations having now been lost to both time and memory. Cults of venerations sprang up around the three figures that the pieces represented, with San la Muerte being named the face of Death. This origin story also identifies Death as a male figure generally lacking the other personality characteristics particular to Santa Muerte.

In an attempt to forge a connection between Santa Muerte and San la Muerte, some have proposed that both figures are based on a commonly held cultural figure, one perhaps exchanged and strengthened by trade or warfare. This phenomenon itself isn’t unusual—gods and spirits frequently get new names and new stories when adopted by a new people. However, the Guarani Indians were separated from the Aztecs by a vast geographical distance. At the height of its expansion under Moctezuma II, the Aztec Empire barely stretched into the modern Mexican state of Michoacán, which lies about four hundred miles away from Mexico’s modern southernmost border. The southward advance of the Aztecs was stopped by the fierce (and better armed) Purépechas.
Empire, which further limits the possibility of meaningful contact between the Aztecs of central Mexico and the Guarani tribes of northern South America. Given as well that the stories surrounding San la Muerte appear to have no relationship with those surrounding Santa Muerte, there is no doubt that these figures have nothing to do with each other. However, their names do translate to the same thing in English because English does not generally use gender-specific nouns. Thus, the fact that Santa Muerte and San la Muerte are different figures, one male and one female, with vastly different portfolios and personalities, is sometimes misunderstood by nonnative Spanish speakers.

Who Are the Devotees of Santa Muerte?
Santa Muerte’s popularity continues to grow unabated despite condemnation from religious and civil authorities and the lack of an official cult. The Saint of Death’s popularity is driven by a simple but immutable logic: death is a guarantee for us all, but that does not make it evil. Death and decay are necessary parts of the cycle of life because they make room for the creation of new things. Without death, life cannot renew itself. Since death drives the engines of creation, it is not inherently hateful, nor is it our enemy. Every choice we make will lead to our own eventual deaths, some choices more quickly than others. Since the Saint of Death herself already has an amiable attitude, why not make her a powerful friend? If death is your ally, you have nothing to fear.

Santa Muerte’s broad portfolio of powers allows her to wield substantial influence in the lives of her devotees, and she does so generously. Why would the power of death be so favorably inclined? Santa Muerte has a warm and friendly personality because she understands that we are only human. We live in
bodies that get tired, feel pain, and grow old. We often make deci-
sions based on our emotions rather than our reason. We also make
mistakes. Since death is life’s constant companion, Santa Muerte is
always nearby, witnessing everything that we do. Because she sees
everything, she understands our struggles and our joys better than
any other spirit. Most importantly, Santa Muerte does not judge
people for their actions. She knows that we are fallible creatures.
Just as it makes no sense to blame the rain for making things wet,
it makes no sense to blame people for acting like people.

Because Santa Muerte does not condemn people for being
themselves, she also does not discriminate among her followers and
considers each individual equally worthy. This belief system is in
opposition to the teachings of so many social and religious authori-
ties, who condemn certain behaviors as immoral. Different lifestyle
choices and decisions may cause the individual to be rejected by
family and community. Punishments may be quite severe.

For example, certain social institutions believe that homo-
sexuality is unnatural or sinful. This is a particularly common
point of view in predominantly Catholic Mexico. Gay individu-
als often conceal their sexual orientation, or else face discrimi-
nation, harassment, social ostracism, and possibly even violence
or death. In some religions, divorce may be forbidden because
it means breaking a vow made before God. This is especially
common among Catholics, who are often taught that marriage
is a holy sacrament. The newly divorced may find themselves
shunned by other members of their community because their
divorce is perceived as creating a rift with God as well as their
spouse. The condemnation of drug users from the pulpit and by
the media likewise ensures that addicts will not seek the spiritual
and social support that they need to escape their addictions.
To the Saint of Death, none of these things matter. Santa Muerte is famous for her nonjudgmental nature, which is part of her popular appeal. Since death is the great equalizer, Santa Muerte is traditionally called the patron saint of people who live marginal lives on the fringes of society, such as criminals, the homeless, the mentally ill, prostitutes, and unwed mothers. She is also traditionally associated with classes of people whom society and organized religions have typically rejected, such as homosexual and transgender individuals. For this reason, Santa Muerte is also frequently called the patron saint of the gay community.

Many people involved in the drug trafficking trade pray to Santa Muerte for protection from the very real threats of violence and death that they face daily. Paradoxically, the very same kinds of threats have led those who fight the drug trade, including many members of the police and military, to pray to the Saint of Death for protection as well. Santa Muerte has emerged as the patron saint of anyone who faces violence and death, particularly at night. This includes the police and military, as well as paramedics and firefighters.

Anyone is free to form a connection with Santa Muerte because dying is a universal experience. Death is in no hurry to collect most of us, however, which leaves the Saint of Death free to enjoy the antics of the living. Being part of the machinery of creation, she prefers the brightest and most interesting flowers in the human garden.

Santa Muerte freely accepts people of every race, every religion, and every gender. The Saint of Death will not reject you for loving the “wrong” person, believing in the “wrong” faith, or being the “wrong” skin color. She will not punish you for cheating on your spouse or on your taxes. She does not require you to
be a Catholic or even to have faith in the Christian God. Santa Muerte happily accepts the attentions of Muslims, Buddhists, Pagans, curious agnostics, and anyone else who decides to seek a connection with her. The devotees of Santa Muerte come in every shape and size. The only common denominator between them is their mortality: one day they all will die. Santa Muerte accepts each and every person with the same loving grace, regardless of who they are. She is quick to apply her considerable influence in their lives, protecting them from harm and granting them peace, prosperity, and happiness. To her devotees, Santa Muerte is the Mother of All Answers.

Although her devotees see her as a generous, loving, and even maternal figure, these are not the only facets of Santa Muerte’s personality. Mother Death’s scythe is sharp, and she is known for her vicious streak. Death may strike at any time, causing destruction, fear, panic, and confusion. Every gift that Santa Muerte can give with one hand, she can take with the other. Curses cast in the Saint of Death’s name can have devastating effects on their targets. Through her, it is possible to break up marriages and families, destroy businesses and property, and cause illness and legal problems. Santa Muerte may torment individuals with frightening visions to drive them mad, or surround them with nasty and violent spirits. She can certainly also drag someone into an early grave.

If Santa Muerte is supposed to be such a generous and loving figure, why is she willing to be so destructive? The reason is simple. We are all subject to illness and misfortune because we are mortal. Although unpleasant, these things are very much a part of life. As a constant observer of human activity, Santa Muerte understands our motivations better than any other power. She
renders no judgment on us for our actions. Whether we choose virtue or sin makes no difference to Santa Muerte. The Saint of Death views her own interactions with the living with this same neutral attitude because we leave this world just as naked as when we entered it and similarly lacking in possessions. You can’t take it with you, as the old saying goes.

Santa Muerte’s destructive capacity is not inherently evil. It is simply a reflection of the desires of the people who call on her. It is up to each individual practitioner whether to call on Santa Muerte for beneficial or detrimental reasons. Many practitioners actually routinely call on Santa Muerte’s destructive power, but in a protective capacity rather than a malicious one. After all, no force is better suited to destroying curses and hexes or driving off harmful spirits than the power of Death herself.

Learning to Love the Saint of Death

Although Santa Muerte is a folk saint who comes to us from Mexico, her appeal is as universal as death. The Saint of Death’s power over this world is indisputable, since everything in it is affected by death and decay. The speed with which she acts is also legendary because nothing flies on faster wings than death. Even though she is stereotypically associated with fringe elements of society, in truth, her devotees are as varied as life itself. The Saint of Death is a warm and generous figure who inspires intense passion among her followers, causing them to embrace death as a friend, lover, and mother. To them, she is the source of all comfort and aid, the opener of ways, and the keeper of their secrets.

Santa Muerte’s rapid rise in popularity has made many witches and magicians interested in working with her, but uncertain how or where to begin. Because her cult is so decentralized, the body
of knowledge regarding her is likewise decentralized. The Saint of Death has no central religious authority that dictates any particular required beliefs or rituals. This lack of doctrine is useful to magical practitioners because it frees them to adapt their veneration of the Saint of Death to their preferred style of magic rather than requiring that they follow a dogmatic ritual program.

However, because her veneration is so decentralized, it can also be difficult to find a starting point for working with Santa Muerte. This book is intended to bridge that gap:

- The book first describes the cultural and historical trends that gave rise to the modern veneration of Santa Muerte; then it explores each of her aspects in detail.

- Instructions on how to organize a Santa Muerte altar follow this description, as well as details on how to make offerings to the Saint of Death.

These elements combine to provide an effective foundation for the rituals provided in this book, which use the seven-color variation of Santa Muerte instead of the more traditional three-color system. Therefore, as a practitioner, you are encouraged to begin your exploration of the Skeletal Saint over a week-long period, with each day dedicated to a particular aspect of Santa Muerte. While this is how the rituals are presented in later chapters, you are also welcome to explore the different aspects of Santa Muerte as you are guided or see fit.

The common elements of the veneration of Santa Muerte are rooted in both Mexican culture and Catholic saint worship, which itself shares many characteristics with many of the simpler techniques of magic. Consequently, learning how to work
with Santa Muerte is easy for anyone who is already comfortable with basic magic skills like charging ritual candles and cleansing ritual tools. This book presumes you already have a basic understanding of the principles and techniques of magic.

Even though familiarity or faith in Catholicism is not required to work with Santa Muerte, I found my own upbringing as a Catholic to be helpful in developing these techniques. However, many traditional Santa Muerte rituals presume that the practitioner is Catholic and strongly reference elements of that religious system. Therefore, some of the logic and lore behind traditional Santa Muerte rituals can be confusing if you are not Catholic. Throughout this book, I have done my best to distill my many years of catechism into explanations that make these concepts accessible to someone with little knowledge of Catholicism. The rituals in this book are dedicated to Santa Muerte alone and are suitable for use by the Catholic and the non-Catholic alike.

Since Santa Muerte is also a patron of magic, she can easily be incorporated into any system of magical beliefs, even if her role is just to provide a conduit for the magical practitioner’s own rebirth. After all, death and decay are universal facts of life. By providing an in-depth understanding of the Saint of Death’s roots as well as a comprehensive ritual guide, this book creates a solid foundation on which you, as the magical practitioner, may build your own unique Santa Muerte practice.