

Mexico's Trinity of Death: Santa Muerte, Day of the Dead and Calavera Catrina

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The season of death is upon us. Halloween and the Mexican death trinity of Day of the Dead, Catrina Calavera (Skeleton Dame), and Santa Muerte (Saint Death) engage millions of North and South Americans in rituals that reconnect us with our own mortality. Leaving aside the jack-o-lanterns and trick or treating of our own childhood in the U.S., we seek to answer one of the two questions that invariably come up during our presentations on Santa Muerte. What is the relationship, if any, among Saint Death, Catrina Calavera, and Day of the Dead? The other question that always comes up is "Do you believe in her?"

Saint Death

Let's first take a look at the member of the Mexican death trinity who has been in the limelight during the past two years, especially with her cameo appearance in the TV series, *Breaking Bad*. Santa Muerte is a Mexican folk saint who personifies death in the form a female skeleton. Whether as a votive candle, gold medallion or statue, she is typically depicted as a Grim Reapress, wielding the same scythe and wearing a shroud similar to the Grim Reaper, her male twin. Folk saints, unlike official Catholic ones, are spirits of the dead considered holy for their miracle working powers. However, what really sets the Bony Lady apart from other folk saints is that for most devotees she is the personification of death itself and not of a deceased human being.

In Mexico and Latin America in general, such folk saints as Jesus Malverde, Gaucho Gil, and San La Muerte (the Argentine cousin of Santa Muerte) have millions of devotees and are often petitioned more than the official saints. These homegrown saints are united to their devotees by nationality and often by both locality and social class. A Mexico City street vendor explained the appeal of the skeleton saint to her saying, "She understands us because she is a battleaxe (cabrona) like us." In contrast, Mexicans would never refer to the Virgin of Guadalupe as a

cabrona, which is also often used to mean "bitch." All the major shrines in Mexico and the U.S. celebrate annual feast days with the specific date varying. Doña Queta's historic shrine in the notorious barrio of Tepito will commemorate its twelfth anniversary on Halloween.

Day of the Dead

While in the United States, All Hallows Eve has taken on the darker image of Halloween, with haunted houses, horror movie themes and the dead returning for trouble rather than tradition, in Latin America and Europe, where Catholic influences have remained strong, the first and second of November continue to hold their ancient ties to festivals associated with sacred remembrance of the influences found in the still living past. In Mexico, Día de los Muertos (Day of the Dead,) which falls on November 1 and 2, is one of the most anticipated times of the year. It's a time to reconnect with deceased friends, family members and ancestors in a festive spirit of remembrance and celebration.

Before the Spanish conquest, the Aztecs dedicated most of the month of August to their goddess of death, Mictecacihuatl. As part of the overarching suppression of indigenous religion, the Catholic Church exorcised Mictecacihuatl and moved the date to coincide with All Saints Day (November 1), which is also known in Mexico as Day of the Innocents as it focuses on deceased infants and children, and All Souls Day (November 2), which centers on departed adults. Visits to the cemetery to bring offerings to the dead, such as candles, flowers and food, are common, along with offerings left at home altars, and accompany more festive celebrations including the striking sugar skulls, calaveras de azúcar, which have become a familiar icon of the tradition. Adorned with the name of a deceased relative, the skulls are eaten as a reminder that death is not a bitter end, but rather a sweet continuation of the natural cycles of life.

The Skeleton Dame

Born around 1910, from the pen of the famed Mexican illustrator José Guadalupe Posada, Calavera Catrina is another skeleton that has become central to Mexico's cultural identity. As a satirical cartoon created to mock the early 20th-century Mexican upper classes, Catrina bears a remarkable likeness to images of Carmen Romero Rubio, the second wife of Porfirio Díaz, whose turbulent presidency was one of the main targets of Posada's biting satire.

Posada's popular illustrations were deeply embedded into the cultural context of the Mexican Revolution (1910-20), the first great revolt of the twentieth century, which led to a new appreciation of the indigenous past. The symbolism of the skeleton, which in indigenous traditions throughout the Americas represents the continuation of life's cyclical turn, proved to be a potent and resonant image for Mexican cultural independence from its Eurocentric elite.

Although Posada's illustrations show skeletons dressed in European finery as a critique of his elite compatriots, by the time the famous Mexican muralist, Diego Rivera, included Calavera Catrina in his well known work, Sueño de una tarde dominical en la Alameda (Dream of a Sunday afternoon along Central Alameda,) in 1948, she had become a symbol of the integration of pre-Hispanic and post-colonial ideals. Today she remains an important icon of Mexican

national identity, and speaks to the unique and fruitful cultural dialogue which continues in Latin America.

The Cycles of Life and Death

The culture of Mexico is not alone in its remembrance of death, but it is unique in how, more often than not, these commemorations are more festive than somber. Whether it is under the scythe of Santa Muerte during the festivities of Dia de los Muertos, or in the 'elegant' image of Calavera Catrina, death plays a central role in the daily lives of Mexicans, and continues to provide a potent image for the inevitable cycles of life. Running through it all is a sense of humor and empowerment, which takes the hard lessons of death and embraces them with a fullness that is often surprising to those unfamiliar with these traditions.

On a personal level death becomes an image of rebirth and renewal, while in the wider culture the imagery and practices associated with these traditions keep the memory of the nation's turbulent history alive. For a nation with such striking disparities between rich and poor, death also becomes the great equalizer, where even billionaire Carlos Slim falls to Santa Muerte's leveling scythe. As they say in Mexico, "death is just and even-handed for everyone since we will all die." For many, this unalterable truth provides a strong reason to celebrate life while there is still time.