

This is the death cult the FBI says is spreading among drug cartels

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The drug war has been going on for so long, the inward, secret lives of narcotics traffickers are beginning to take on a life all of their own, separate from the national borders we know as their homes. They have their own rituals, coded languages, technology, and now, even a secret religion has sprung up around their lives.

It's called the cult of *Santa Muerte* – "Holy Death" – and it's more intense and deadly than anything that came before it.



A Santa Muerte follower announces its adherence.

(FBI)

Since Mexican President Felipe Calderon upped the ante on the Drug War in 2006 by taking down the highest-ranking members of certain cartels, violence in the

country has increased exponentially. Since then some 45,000 people have died in the drug war. The level of violence and death without warning has spurred the spread of the Santa Muerte religion in Mexico and beyond. Santa Muerte, in turn, spurs the narcos to become more and more violent.

The worshippers of Santa Muerte are primarily disenfranchised, poor Mexicans who turn to the cartels as a means of employment but soon begin the same cycle of murder and torture as those who came before them. The activities they're forced to conduct aren't accepted by pure Catholicism, so they turn elsewhere for comfort.



And now, you can buy the figurines on Amazon.

Santa Muerte has developed as a belief system for over 50 years or more. According to the FBI, "The Santa Muerte cult could best be described as [following] a set of ritual practices offered on behalf of a supernatural personification of death...she is comparable in theology to supernatural beings or archangels." Unlike Death or the Virgin of Guadalupe, as she is often represented, her scales don't actually work, a reflection of her amoral nature. Since many narco foot soldiers will end up dying a brutal death, the appeal of worshipping a death-like figure is obvious. In the meantime, Santa Muerte advocates are enjoying the world's earthly pleasures.

While the FBI stops short of calling the worship of Santa Muerte a full-blown religion, it does have its own belief system, as well as priests, temples, and shrines, along with all the rituals associated with religion – including ritual killings.



A statue of Santa Muerte in a practitioner's home.

Ritualistic Santa Muerte killings are abundant in Mexico and South America amongst narco-traffickers, but the killings are now making their way into the United States, albeit, primarily close to the border cities already struck by violence that has become the signature of the War on Drugs, and only four have been confirmed as related to Santa Muerte.

Border agents and local police have been thoroughly trained on the ins and outs of the religion and its followers, but luckily very few have been seen on the U.S. side of the border.

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