

Coatlicue and the “Holy Death”: Two Terrible Mothers of the Mexicans

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Abstract: The image of the ancient prehispanic goddess found in Mexico, was not simply that of a nurturing and benevolent deity. The earth goddess Coatlicue, mother of the Aztec patron god Huitzilopochtli, embodied not only nature's life-giving powers but her destructive force as well. The Aztecs had one of the most highly developed representations of the terrible mother goddess in all history. This paper will explore the myths and images of the Aztec goddess Coatlicue and those of the Holy Death, a contemporary Mexican “divine” mother, whose cult is growing in Mexico and the Americas. The representation of the skeletal Holy Death is as terrifying as that of the ancient Aztec goddess Coatlicue. This study analyzes the image and beliefs associated with the “feminine divine” in ancient and contemporary Mexico.

Key words: myth, Coatlicue, Holy Death, Mexico, goddess, Aztecs.

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Introduction

Goddess images were central to the devotional life of the Aztecs and other indigenous peoples, especially the peasants and those living in smaller towns and villages outside the central city of Tenochtitlan (present day Mexico City). In these rural communities, fertility and fecundity more than war rituals and sacrificial tribute continued to be the main focus of cultic activity. The image of the ancient archetype of the Great Mother found in Mexico, however, was not simply that of a nurturing and benevolent deity. As a personification of the heavens and the earth the goddess embodied not only nature's life-giving powers but her destructive force as well. The Aztecs had one of the most highly developed representations of the terrible face of the goddess in all history. This paper will explore the myths and images of an old Aztec goddess called Coatlicue and those of the Holy Death, a contemporary Mexican "divine" mother, considering both the meaning of these images, and the beliefs associated with the "feminine divine" represented by the image.

Coatlicue: Mother of the Aztecs

Coatlicue or serpent skirt (in nahuatl, the Aztec's language), is the mother of the Mexican patron and warrior god Huitzilopochtli. Being the mother of the most venerated Aztec god, Coatlicue is a very important goddess in Aztec mythical history.

She was miraculously impregnated with a ball of down while sweeping in Coatepec (serpent mountain). Her children, *Coyolxauhqui* (She with the Belled Cheeks) and the Centzon Huitznahua were furious at her condition and decided to kill her. At the moment of her death, Coatlicue gave birth to the fully armed Huitzilopochtli who then slays and dismembers his sister. Coyolxauhqui is then banished to darkness and becomes the moon (Sahagún 1950–1982, Bk. II, p. 172). The most thorough account of Huitzilopochtli birth appears in the works of Sahagun. Friar Bernardino de Sahagún famous work *General History of the Things of New Spain* (1575–1577), is composed of twelve books written in Spanish and Nahuatl with illustrations drawn by indigenous artists. It documents the culture, religion and history of the Aztec people.

In this connection, Coatlicue represents the maternal source of Mexica heritage and their power and dominion gained through war. She is also associated with conflict and destruction as she warned the Mexica of their eventual demise. In this tale, which happened when

the Mexica were rising to power, she was waiting in her home Aztlan or Chicomotzoc (The Place of Seven Caves) for her son Huitzilopochtli to return. The great Mexica ruler Moctezuma I (he ruled ca. 1440–1469) sent sixty magicians to visit her, for Aztlan was the Mexica place of origin. They found Coatlicue weeping because she missed Huitzilopochtli. She then said that Huitzilopochtli would lose all the cities he had conquered for the Mexica in the same order that he had won them. Only then would he return to his mother's side, abandoning the Mexica to their fate. Moctezuma was greatly saddened by Coatlicue's strong admonitions and her grim prediction (Durán 1994, Chapter XXVII, pp. 216–222).

Coatlicue was the great goddess of Aztec people. Like great goddesses around the world, she was regarded as the origin of life, the mother of the gods and all beings. She was also the one who devours all that is at the end of its lifespan. Her association to agriculture, hunting and sacrifice is also suggested by the two major festivals devoted to her. Coatlicue was celebrated (along with other deities) in two major Mexica festivals. The spring festival was called "Tozozontli", and it took place at the start of the rainy season. During this month she was especially worshipped by the *xochimanque* or those "in charge of the flowers" as she was their patron. As Sahagún reports "On this feast they offered the first fruits of the flowers which had bloomed earliest that year" (Sahagún 1950–1982, Bk. II, p. 5). He then says that Coatlicue was offered all kinds of flowers "small, little, tiny, minute ones, no matter how many, no matter how little" (Sahagún 1950–1982, Bk. II, p. 57). In the autumn, a hunting ritual was called "Quecholli". During this feast, a woman impersonating Coatlicue was sacrificed.

Coatlicue was also in certain contexts identified as a virgin. According to the legend, told by Sahagún, Coatlicue put into her skirt a little ball of feathers that had fallen from the sky and she was miraculously impregnated. Although it seems that in the typical mythology of Old Stone Age around the world, the supreme being is the great goddess who creates all and does it alone, with no need for a male partner, in this myth, reported by Spanish friars, there are too many elements that recall the annunciation of the Virgin Mary and her miraculous conception. Coatlicue gives birth to a sun god, Huitzilopochtli without a partner. It is a "virgin birth", a conception "without sin". But her children did not believe and were sure she had dishonored the family by sexual sin. So, they planned to kill her. She was saved by the sud-

den birth of her son, who slew hundreds of the unbelieving children who were stars.

The myth of Coatlicue's conception was related by the Indians, when evangelization was already in process. Native people had already been told the story of Jesus Christ's conception and birth. Therefore, they could have reshaped the myth about the birth of their patron god Huitzilopochtli, in a way that seemed similar to the Gospel story. A last attempt to demonstrate the friars that their patron god was not so different from the Christian one. However, it is hard to prove, the real motive behind the creation of this important Aztec myth.

Coatlicue and her Representations

No monument evokes more strongly the Pre-Columbian past and causes admiration so mingled with terror, as the colossal basalt statue of Coatlicue. Her head consists of a double-serpent, two rattlesnakes looking at each other. Her hands and feet are claws and she has fanged faces at her elbows. At the centre is a large skull. Her skirt is made up of interwoven serpents, hence her name in Nahuatl "serpent skirt". Her necklace is made of human hearts and hands (Fig. 1).



Fig. 1. Coatlicue. *National Museum of Anthropology, Mexico City*

The statue was found near the ceremonial center of the old Aztec capital (now Mexico City, in 1790 by Antonio Leon y Gama. After the statue was excavated by the Spanish in the late 18th century, it was put back to earth. Many have reported that it is because she was so horrible, but in reality, the statue was reburied because the Christians feared her image would stir up the old faith. After the Independence of Mexico, the statue was rediscovered by William Bullock, an English traveler in 1824. This rich business man paid to have a copy of Coatlicue and other Mexica sculptures for an exhibition in London. The statue was then placed in the Real y Pontificia Universidad de Mexico, and here local native people began to make offerings to the goddess. It was quickly removed to a Museum and there it has remained. In 1940 an almost identical statue was excavated but she wears a skirt of hearts rather than intertwined serpents. This statue is much more battered and eroded. Both statues had the date 12 Reed carved on the back. Fragments found indicate there may have been a third similar statue. The earth goddesses represented in the two sculptures [of Coatlicue and Yollotlicue] are both victims and devourers. As victims, they give their life for the birth of the Mexica state. They are devourers because they demand sacrifices in return.

At the very center of Coatlicue figure is a contrast of quintessential opposites: breasts seen behind a skull, two images of life and death. The figure is at once passive and active, monster and victim. She is a divine mother who gave birth to both gods and men. Yet, she wears a necklace of severed hearts and hands and a dress of twisted rattlesnakes. Clearly, native people were not taken back as by this awesome image. They worshipped her as their patron god's mother. Western attitudes towards Aztec art were very different. According to Spanish friars the ugliness of Aztec idols was a proof of their mischievous character. They all represented the different faces of Satan, the Evil one. Especially those, like Coatlicue, whose body and face was composed of rattle snakes (Gruzinski 2001, p. 25).

After the independence and with the creation of a Mexican nation, there was a movement for the reevaluation of the ancient Indian arts. The movement acquired a political and even revolutionary significance. The first great painting to emerge from the Revolution — Saturnino Herrán's moving "*Nuestros Dioses*" 1915 assigned a central place and a complex symbolism to the Coatlicue.

Mexican artist Saturnino represents in a masterful way, synthesis of old and new gods in Mexican soil. Christ is shown crucified on the



Fig. 2. Coatlicue, Saturnino Herrán's "Nuestros Dioses" 1915, Museum of Aguascalientes, Mexico

body of Coatlicue, who simultaneously gives birth to him, and protects him. This controversial painting by Saturnino recalls the Aztec myth and transforms the "virginal" Coatlicue in the mother of Christ (Fig. 2). Most probably the Aztec myth of Huitzilopochtli birth, inspired Mexican artist Saturnino. Huitzilopochtli, the patron God of the Aztec, become Christ, and Coatlicue "miraculously impregnated with a ball of down" is the Virgin Mary.

Many of the great Mexican artists of 20th century like Clemente Orozco, Diego Rivera, Miguel Covarrubias will then follow Saturnino's view of Mexican past and chose Coatlicue as their muse. Coatlicue was no

more an awesome earth goddess to be hidden. Alfredo Chavero, described her as the most beautiful idol in the Museo Nacional (Keen 1990, p. 510).

The image of the Aztec terrible mother Coatlicue became popular again as a symbol of the glorious ancient past of Mexico. Among all the 20th century representations of Coatlicue, however Saturnino's remarkable painting makes an important statement: the hideous Aztec mother Coatlicue is a caring and merciful mother like the fine-looking Virgin Mary.

The Holy Death: Mother of the Mexicans

The cult of Santa Muerte is a popular Mexican devotion that has been demonized by the media, the press and the Catholic Church. For many years there was an almost absolute ignorance of this cult in the Medias (Villareal 2009, pp. 5–13).

The clandestine cult of La Santa Muerte became public in Mexico City in 2001 when Mrs. Enriqueta Romero installed a six-foot-tall figure of La Niña Blanca in an altar built especially for her in Calle Alfarería, in the Tepito neighborhood of Mexico City. This neighborhood

is known for its streets crowded with informal shops, as well as for being a place where all kinds of merchandise, including weapons and drugs are traded.

The installation of the first altar of Santa Muerte in the streets of Tepito, transformed a hidden cult into a popular devotion. This produced a proliferation of this devotion not only outside Tepito a neighborhood of Mexico City, but also in many states of the Mexican Republic, in the United States and in Central America, where many Mexican emigrants are living today. The followers of a Santa Muerte, can now express their devotion freely with street altars, wearing scapulars and tattoos with her image and even creating new sanctuaries dedicated to her (Fig. 3).

The veneration of Santa Muerte has been associated to criminality, occultism, Satanism, black magic. These prejudices have been nurtured mainly by Mexican and foreign medias (Freese 2005).

The cult of *Santa Muerte* is of popular origin and responds to the needs and problems of people living in situations of vulnerability. Even if some of their devotees are criminals, most of her followers belong to different social classes and they are usually people who have not found answers in other cults. The Holy Death does not need a representative, a leader or an institution to communicate with her devotees. She is a deity more accessible to people who believe in her.

The lack of a religious doctrine and an official organization allows the followers to communicate with the Holy Death as they please. Nevertheless, most prayers are far from improvised. A specific type of prayer that has arisen during the first collective ritual dedicated to the Holy Death is the rosary.

The main festival dedicated to the Holy Death is celebrated on October 31st, the same day that Doña Queta took her statue outside and



Fig. 3. Raising of *Santa Muerte* images during a service for the deity on *Alfareria Street, Tepito, Mexico City*

placed it on a street altar. This same date coincides with the Day of the Dead festival in Mexico. On this day, thousands of pilgrims gather at Calle Alfarería (in the barrio of Tepito) with their own image of *Santa Muerte* (made of wood, paper maché, resin, coconut fiber or maguey). They carry bags of sweets, apples, flowers, scapulars and also cigars to clean their images. Those who arrive earlier, make their private altars on the sidewalks of the street. Some come kneeling in penance to the altar of Doña Enriqueta Romero. This woman, who is 63 years old is the official caretaker of the image. She is responsible for guiding, with microphone in hand, the rosary and prayers to *La Santa* for almost an hour during the celebrations (Reyes 2010, pp. 90–98).

The Holy Death and her Representation

The Holy Death is represented holding a scythe and world in her hands. This image derives from the medieval *Dance macabre* and the



Fig. 4. Holy Death dressed as Catrina

baroque representations of *Vanitas* very popular in Spain during the 17th century¹.

In contemporary Mexico, however *La Santa* can wear different lavish and colorful dresses. Usually, she has her dress changed on the last day of every month. The new dress is offered by some devotee who expresses his/her gratitude for a received grace. Sometimes, the Holy Death is dressed like a *Catrina* with a pink dress and a tulle hat, holding an elegant umbrella (Fig. 4). Sometimes she wears a red velvet crown and a mantle like a queen, and even a purple

¹ Vanitas, that is, vanity. So called by the symbolism of the objects they represented as skulls, dull candles, bones, rotten fruit symbolizing decadence, bubbles and the hourglass, symbols of the brevity of life, books, musical instruments, all of them useless pleasures when death comes. Some of the best known Vanitas are those created for the Hospital de la Misericordia by Juan de Valdés Leal (1622–1690), a famous Spanish baroque artist.

(or black) mantle like the Virgin of Sorrows. A magnificent example of how these two images overlap is the representation of the Holy Death who holds the corpse of Christ in her lap (Fig. 5).

Only on October 31, the day of her feast, the image is dressed in white, like a bride. Another similarity is with the Virgin Mary, who, according to Christian theology is the bride of Christ² (Fig. 6).

The sculptures of the Holy Death are made of different materials (resin, plastic or bone) and she can be represented standing or sitting on a throne, sometimes even with wings like the Virgin of Apocalypse like in the Sanctuary of Santa Ana Chapitro (Michoacán). The *Virgen del Apocalipsis* is a very common image of Our Lady in colonial Mexican art.



Fig. 5. Holy Death holding the corpse of Christ

Like the Virgin, the Holy Death, is an intercessor and a protector of her devotees. Like Mary, the prayer dedicated to her is the rosary, and despite her spooky baroque image, the devotees describe her appearance like that of a luminous being, a protective mother, who can be invoked when they are in danger or suffer from some illness.

The Holy Death is called with different epithets which show the deep affection of her devotees: *Niña Blanca*, (little white girl) *Flaquita* (the skinny one), *Hermana Blanca* (White Sister) *Santita* (little Saint). However, one of the most frequent epithets that describe her skeletal image is "true mother" (*verdadera madre*) and "sweet mother" (*dulce madre*). These same appellations are used by Mexicans when they invoke the Virgin Mary (Villamil & Cisneros 2011, pp. 29–38).

² Christian theologians interpreted the Old Testament *Song of Solomon* or *Song of Songs* as an allegory of love between Christ and his wife the church, identified with Mary.



Fig. 6. Personal shrine with *Santa Muerte* dressed as a bride in *Tepito, Mexico City*

La Santísima receives petitions for love, luck, health, money and the devotees say that she is very miraculous. On the 31st October, the day of her anniversary, the devotees sing *Las mañanitas* to her (a Mexican birthday song). On 12th December at 12 pm, in the biggest sanctuary of Mexico *La Basílica de Guadalupe* the sacred spot where the Virgin of Guadalupe made her first appearance, the massive number of devotees that gather there every year, intone the same birthday song to celebrate the Mother of the Americas.

Phrases like “protect us with your mantle” or “my mantle will protect you” are often used in prayers dedicated to The Holy

Death and they recall the Catholic image of Our Lady of Mercy, who is usually represented sheltering a multitude of people under her protecting mantle:

I can help you because I am an angel created by Our Father, I am the little girl, look, my arms carry you, my hands comfort you, my mantle covers and protects you, my shadow takes care of you, my feet guide you, my scythe defends you, my world where you live, my breath the air you breathe, my balance judges with justice³ (Fragoso 2011, pp. 5–16).

The devotees of the Holy Death see in this skeletal medieval image, a benevolent saint created by God, a kind of messenger or angel appointed to help humans, not a malicious, ravaging being that destroys life.

La Santa Muerte fulfills all devotees’ petitions, according to her followers, especially those regarding love and business success. One of

³ “Yo te puedo ayudar porque soy un ángel que Nuestro Padre creó, yo soy la niña mira, mis brazos que te cargan, mis manos que te consuelan, mi manto que te cubre y resguarda, mi sombra que te cuida, mis pies que te guían, mi guadaña que te defiende, mi mundo en el que vives, mi aliento el aire que respiras, mi balanza que juzga con justicia” (Translation by the author).

the most frequent petitions is fidelity. One of the many legends about the Holy Death, tell the story of a woman who was deceived by her husband and was so deeply affected by this that she committed suicide. Thus, God made her patron saint of marriages. For this reason, newly married couples ask *La Santísima* to bless their union and they usually have a picture taken with her statue. *La Niña Blanca* protects married couples and may harm an unfaithful husband, if his wife requests it. As a Lady of the Night, she takes care of all the people who work at night, she helps taxi drivers, mariachis, bartenders, policemen, soldiers, prostitutes.

The cult of the Holy Death is accessible to everyone who chooses it and it is not just a cult of marginal or excluded groups such as gays, prostitutes and prisoners. *La Santísima* is the patron saint of many merchants as well as children who work in the street and celebrities. Housewives are another social group that follows this cult. Many of them live in dangerous areas with high level of crimes and *La Santísima* protects their children and husbands when they go out. Moreover, the belief in the Holy Death does not prevent a devotee from being faithful to Our Lady of Guadalupe, patron saint of Mexico (Perdigón 2008, pp. 146–148).

Conclusions

Even if representations of the Holy Death reveal iconographic elements similar to those used in images of Our Lady, and even if she is worshiped as a mother who gives comfort to her children, her appearance is horrific and terrifying. Her hideous representations is similar to that of Coatlicue, the great goddess of Aztec people, who was visualized with a double-serpent head, wears a skirt of interwoven serpents, and she has fanged faces at her elbows. Yet, Coatlicue was loved as the everlasting bringer of bounty. Aztecs did not stress her horrific aspect.

Prehispanic earth goddesses such as Coatlicue, Cihuacoatl, Tlaltecuhtli had usually a frightful appearance but at the same time they were givers of life and fertility. The sacred feminine in prehispanic Mexico was associated with blood, dismemberment, decapitation and death. These goddesses had skeletal and emaciated bodies and if the devotees did not make offering to them they would get angry and punish them with floods, earthquakes, droughts.

The Holy Death is also an ambivalent deity: she can be wretched and bountiful. She can protect from evil those who invoke her, but she

punishes those who leave her. People say that those who lose faith in her will be punished in what they most love in life.

It seems that the Mexica, as well as the devotees of the Holy Death, are not frightened by the horrible image of their deity, they see beyond her repulsive image.

The terrifying goddess of the Mexicans, like the skeleton carrying a scythe of contemporary Mexicans, becomes a protector, a mother of all cycles, associated with a large number of positive life experiences.

Western and Catholic aesthetic criteria associate ugliness and monstrosity with evil and beauty with goodness. Pre-Hispanic representations of goddesses encountered by the Spanish friars in New Spain had features that resembled the European notion of the devil. With sculptures such as Coatlicue to contend with, it not surprising that the friars would identify these terrifying female images with their concept of the demonic. In Europe, medieval miniatures of the devil sometimes depicted Satan with mask-like faces representing his sins on the joints of his knees and shoulders and sometimes on his chest, stomach or buttocks. The mendicant friars emphasized entirely the negative characteristics of these female deities. They did not understand the difference between the Aztec goddess and their medieval European notions of the devil. The Spanish friar who disembarked in Mexico in the sixteenth century, brought with them many images and statues of the Virgin Mary, their goddess. These images, brought to protect them during the voyage turned out to be the first symbols of Catholic religion that the “indios” saw replacing their goddesses. Mary was always shown in the flower of youth, with golden hair and arrayed in spotless white with a blue mantle or scarf, holding her child Jesus. Her goodness was reflected by her beauty (Kröger & Granziera 2012).

Mary's image would exert a remarkable influence on the colonization of Mexico in the sixteenth century and play a central role in the Church's mission to evangelize and civilize the masses during the following centuries. However, the ancient and modern Mexican attitude towards the artistic representation of a divine mother did not change over the years. Contemporary Mexicans can worship the beautiful Lady of Guadalupe, patron saint of their country, and venerate the awesome skeletal image of the Holy Death. There are both protective divine mothers. Both Coatlicue and the Holy Death have been syncretized with Mary. Saturnino's painting is a wonderful proof of this meeting of two religious cultures: Coatlicue, mother of Huitzilopochtli,

becomes Mary mother of Jesus, while the Holy Death is represented with blue mantle as a queen (of the heavens) and with purple mantle like *la Dolorosa* carrying Christ on her lap.

Mary however does not share the Aztec goddess association with disorder and intimidation. Always represented as beautiful and victorious over sin and death, Mary is distant from the conquered fearsome Mexica goddesses and from the macabre image of the Holy Death.

She is always benign, she does not do harm. While the role of the Holy Death, like that of the goddess within the religious tradition of the Aztec is highly ambivalent. She has the power to heal as well as to harm. It seems that Coatlicue has never left the Aztecs, she has changed her look (more European) but she is regaining her power in the Aztec land and beyond.

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