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**ORGANIZED-CRIME GROWTH AND SUSTAINMENT:
A REVIEW OF THE INFLUENCE OF POPULAR
RELIGION AND BELIEFS IN MEXICO**

by

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March 2016

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ABSTRACT

In 2006, Mexican President Felipe Calderon announced the “war on drugs,” an ongoing, low-intensity, asymmetrical war between the government and various drug cartels that has proven the bloodiest conflict since the Mexican civil war a century ago. Meanwhile, the subculture of *narco-cultura* continues to grow, under the influence of powerful drug cartels throughout Mexico. The narco-cultura has its own dynamic form of dress, music, literature, film, religious beliefs and practices, and slang, which have become standard in some parts of the country, especially among the lower class and uneducated.

This thesis investigates the relationship between the narco-cultura and organized crime in Mexico, as viewed from multiple perspectives. It considers this subculture’s historical origins and its influence on popular religion and *narco-corridos* (ballads). More precisely, this thesis explores how the narco-cultura appropriates religion and religious symbolism to maintain the growth of organized criminal groups.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

I.	INTRODUCTION.....	1
A.	MAJOR RESEARCH QUESTION.....	1
B.	SIGNIFICANCE OF THE RESEARCH QUESTION.....	1
C.	LITERATURE REVIEW	3
D.	POTENTIAL EXPLANATIONS AND HYPOTHESES	11
E.	RESEARCH DESIGN	13
F.	THESIS OVERVIEW	13
II.	UNDERSTANDING LA FAMILIA MICHOACÁNA AND LOS CABALLEROS TEMPLARIOS, AND THEIR RELIGIOUS CULTS.....	15
A.	THE EVOLUTION OF LA FAMILIA MICHOACÁNA AND LOS CABALLEROS TEMPLARIOS	15
1.	Historical Background.....	15
2.	La Familia Michoacána: Background, Leadership, and Enforced Silence.....	19
3.	The Provision of Services and the “Us versus Them” Divide	24
4.	Economic, Social and Cultural Context: Understanding Complexities	27
B.	LA FAMILIA MICHOACÁNA AND LOS CABALLEROS TEMPLARIOS AS RELIGIOUS CULTS.....	30
1.	La Familia’s Quasi-Religious Cult and its Religious Justification	30
2.	Los Caballeros Templarios’ Code of Conduct	36
3.	Los Caballeros Templarios: Narco-Apóstol (Apostle).....	39
C.	CONCLUSION	41
III.	THE SINALOA CARTEL’S USE OF NARCO-CORRIDOS AND EMBRACE OF JESUS MALVERDE	45
A.	HISTORICAL BACKGROUND.....	45
1.	Post-Revolution Corridos and Drug-trafficking Origins	47
2.	The 1930s: Corridos and Drug Contraband	49
3.	The 1940s: Drug-trafficking Evolution and the Popularity of Música Norteña.....	50
4.	The 1950s–60s: Corrido Deterioration and Drug-smuggling Fight.....	51
5.	Narco-Corridos and the Birth of the Narco-Cultura.....	53
6.	The Strengthening of the Narco-Cultura.....	54

7.	Last Decade and a Dash: Narco-Corridos and the Narco-Cultura	55
B.	SINALOA CARTEL: NARCO-CORRIDOS AND JESUS MALVERDE	56
1.	Narco-Corridos as a Recruiting Tool.....	57
2.	Sinaloa: The Tale of Jesus Malverde	61
a.	<i>A Fantasy, but Real.....</i>	<i>61</i>
b.	<i>The Malverde Cult</i>	<i>63</i>
c.	<i>Songs to the Narco-Santón (Narco-Saint).....</i>	<i>66</i>
C.	CONCLUSION	70
IV.	MEXICO’S “UNOFFICIAL SAINTS”	73
A.	NARCO-SAINTS: BACKGROUND	73
1.	The Creation of Images	73
2.	The Making of Saints.....	76
3.	Religious Syncretism: A Fusion of Beliefs	79
B.	RELIGIOUS SYNCRETISM IN THE NARCO-CULTURA	81
1.	La Santa Muerte: Mexico’s Idol, Symbol, and Social Force and Aspects	82
2.	Juan Soldado	89
a.	<i>Historical Context</i>	<i>89</i>
b.	<i>The Legendary Protector of Migrants.....</i>	<i>94</i>
C.	CONCLUSION	97
	LIST OF REFERENCES.....	99
	INITIAL DISTRIBUTION LIST	111

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1.	Mexican Cartels: Areas of Influence/Control.....	23
Figure 2.	Los Caballeros' Code of Conduct: Cover Page	37
Figure 3.	Los Caballeros Templarios Oath	38
Figure 4.	Jesus Malverde.....	62
Figure 5.	Jesus Malverde Shrine in Culiacán, Mexico.....	64
Figure 6.	True Ninth Anima Jesus Malverde	67
Figure 7.	A Statue of La Santa Muerte.....	83
Figure 8.	Santa Muerte Shrine I, Tultitlan, Mexico	88
Figure 9.	Shrine of Juan Soldado at Municipal Cemetery 1, Tijuana	95
Figure 10.	Prayer to Juan Soldado: La Magnifica (The Magnificent)	96
Figure 11.	Inside Juan Soldado's Shrine	97

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LIST OF ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

CIA	Central Intelligence Agency
CROM	Confederación Regional Obrera Mexicana (Revolutionary Confederation of Mexican Workers)
ENOE	encuesta nacional de ocupación y empleo (national survey of occupation and employment)
GDP	gross domestic product
INEGI	Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Geografía (National Institute of Statistics and Geography)
UNDP	United Nations Development Program

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I. INTRODUCTION

A. MAJOR RESEARCH QUESTION

In 2006, Mexican President Felipe Calderon described the “war on drugs” in Mexico as an ongoing, low-intensity, asymmetrical war between the government and various drug cartels.¹ With over 60,000 deaths, the war on drugs is the country’s bloodiest conflict since the Mexican civil war a century ago.² Meanwhile, the subculture of *narco-cultura* continues to grow, under the influence of powerful drug cartels throughout Mexico. The narco-cultura has its own dynamic form of literature, dress, music, film, religious beliefs and practices, and slang, which have become standard in some parts of the country, especially among the lower-class and uneducated. There are various regional differences within the Mexican narco-cultura and its participants.

This thesis investigates the relationship between the narco-cultura and organized crime in Mexico, as viewed from multiple perspectives. It considers the historical origins of this subculture and its influence on the way people use and are influenced by popular religion and *narco-corridos* (ballads). More precisely, this thesis explores how the narco-cultura appropriates religion and religious symbolism to maintain the growth of organized criminal groups.

B. SIGNIFICANCE OF THE RESEARCH QUESTION

Organized crime in Latin America is growing, threatening national security, social services, institutions, and national culture. The problem is particularly acute in Mexico, home to the world’s deadliest drug cartels and a primary venue for the complex phenomenon of narcoculture, including narco-cults and *corridos*. Organized crime in Mexico is wide and pervasive, found in the drug trade (production and trafficking),

¹ Grayson, George, “The Impact of President Felipe Calderon’s War on Drugs on the Armed Forces: The Prospects of Mexico “Militarization” and Bilateral Relations,” *Army war College: Strategic Studies Institute*, (2013), iii-45, <http://www.strategicstudiesinstitute.army.mil/pdffiles/pub1137.pdf>.

² Nick Miroff and William Booth, “Mexico’s Drug War is at a Stalemate as Calderon’s Presidency Ends,” 27 November 2012, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/the_americas/calderon-finishes-his-six-year-drug-war-at-stalemate/2012/11/26/82c90a94-31eb-11e2-92f0-496af208bf23_story.html.

kidnapping, corruption, theft, piracy, sex trade (adult and child), and human smuggling.³ The most lucrative activity is the drug trade, with an estimated value of \$10–\$30 billion annually.⁴ Organized criminal activity is associated with extreme violence and criminality, such as gang execution, confrontation, and aggression towards government officials.⁵ As the Mexican government shows itself helpless to eradicate organized crime and guarantee public safety, many Mexicans are forced to find other means of security by taking justice in their hands.

The narco-cultura has grown increasingly prevalent in recent decades and is an intransigent, complex phenomenon that the Mexican government has yet to adequately address, despite the real threat to homeland security. The recent capture of La Tuta (Servando Gomez), the head of *Los Caballeros Templarios* (the Knights Templar) drug cartel, has once again brought this lethal mixture of religion and crime to the forefront. Just as ISIS and Al Qaeda terrorize in the name of Islam, certain drug cartels promote cults that may venerate illicit folk saints, such as *Santa Muerte* (Holy Death) and Jesus Malverde, and recognized Catholic saints, such as Saint Jude. El Chapo Guzman, the fugitive drug lord of the Sinaloa cartel, is a devotee of his fellow Sinaloan, Jesus Malverde, while Arturo Beltran Leyva (also known as *La Muerte* [The Death]), who led the Beltran Leyva cartel, was devoted to Santa Muerte. Rival cartels invoke the saints for both protection and harm to others. Determining why individuals seek a narco-cult may help determine why organized-crime groups continue to grow.

Though the narco-cultura has profoundly influenced perceptions of religion, faith, devotion, and sin in Mexico, its long-term effects have yet to be explored in-depth. While the relationship between criminal groups and folk beliefs has been of increasing interest in academia, motivational drivers remain a puzzle. As the bonding of popular religion and narcoculture proceeds, acceptance of the criminal lifestyle is promoted and romanticized through popular media such as narco-corridos, or ballads. This research

³ Carlos Vilalta, “How did things get so bad so quickly?” *European Journal on Criminal Policy and Research* 20, (2014), 138.

⁴ Vilalta, “How Did Things Get So Bad So Quickly?” 139.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 138.

analyzes how the narco-cultura, and especially the aspect of syncretistic folk religion, contributes to the expansion of organized crime and legitimates its methods.

C. LITERATURE REVIEW

While there is general agreement on when the war on drugs came to the forefront of Mexican policy, the adoption of the narco-cultura by organized crime groups has called the significance of this timeline into question. Multiple authors cite the roots of narcoculture in the initial years of narcotic prohibition in the early 1900s and remark on its humble beginnings in Sinaloa drug trafficking, before its development into a code of conduct and lifestyle for the narcotics underworld.⁶ During this period, the Chinese immigrated to Mexico in search of jobs, in particular, to Sinaloa, the birthplace of drug trafficking in Mexico; Luis Astorga notes that they brought poppy seeds with them.⁷ Luis Sanchez Godoy observes that cannabis imported by the Chinese was used for medicinal purposes, while poppy plant and its derivate found their way into the lyrics of narco-corridos in Mexico.⁸

Some experts observe that the linkage between rural poverty and anti-Chinese sentiment in Mexico was a direct result of the Chinese influx into the area.⁹ In Sinaloa after the Mexican revolution of 1910, unemployment and starvation were on the rise; as a result, the unemployed, poor, and marginalized from the Mexican government started to find jobs in the commercialization of marijuana and opium, which helped the Chinese build a lucrative business. The cultivation of marijuana did not require big investment on

⁶ Luis Astorga, *Mitología del “Narcotraficante” en México*, [Mythology of “Drug Dealer” in Mexico] (Editorial UNAM Plaza y Valdés, México 1995), 2–56; Luis Astorga, *Drug Trafficking in Mexico: A First General Assessment United Nations Educational*, (Scientific and Cultural Organization, 1999), 25–35; Eric J. Hobsbawm, *Bandits*, (New York City: The New Press; Rev Sub edition, 2000); Jose M. Valenzuela-Arce, *Jefe de Jefes: Corridos y Narcocultura en México* [Boss of Bosses: Corridos and narco in Mexico], (Tijuana, Mexico: Colegio de la Frontera, 2010); Luis C. Restrepo, *La Droga en el Espejo de la Cultura* [Drugs in the Mirror of Culture], (Bogota, Colombia: UCPI, 1994). Lilian Ovalle, James Cuenca, Diana Rivera, *Narcotráfico y Poder Social. Razones para Entrar y Permanecer en el Negocio* [Drug Trafficking and Social Power. Reasons to Enter and Stay in Business], (Cali, Colombia: Pontificia Universidad Javeriana, 2000).

⁷ Astorga, *Drug Trafficking in Mexico*, 25–75.

⁸ Jorge A. Sánchez Godoy, “Procesos de Institucionalización de la Narcocultura en Sinaloa” [Institutionalizing processes of the Narcoculture in Sinaloa], *Frontera norte*, 21 no. 41 (2009), 77–103.

⁹ Restrepo, *Drugs in the Mirror of Culture*, 67–93; Astorga, *Drug Trafficking in Mexico*, 19–45.

the part of Mexican farmers. In addition, marijuana demand allowed them to generate enough profits to support their families.

The existing literature tends to focus on history. An excellent example is Astorga's *Drug Trafficking in Mexico*, which recounts that the decade of the 1920s was characterized by anti-Chinese sentiment, including the exile and seclusion of the Chinese in Sinaloa. Once the Chinese were expelled from Sinaloa, Mexican farmers were in a position to control the production of narcotics. Mexico's production and distribution of morphine was solidified by demand from the United States in World War II and had a competitive effect on the European supply.¹⁰ Sanchez Godoy and Luis Astorga write that during this period, Mexico's production and distribution of narcotics soared, shaping the narco-traffic identity in Mexico as the narco-cultura first began to appear.¹¹

Some authors mark the 1940s to 1970s as a period when narco-trafficking in Mexico had a simple organizational structure as to labor and was considered a family business. These scholars identify the 1970s with increased demand for narcotics in the United States and the creation of alliances with the Colombian narco-world. After the 1970s, as drug trafficking expanded in Mexico, the narco-cultura started to infiltrate urban society; as the subculture merged into the dominant culture, the process of legitimization began.¹² Nevertheless, many researchers discount historical factors and focus their analysis on U.S. demand, without evaluating the overarching influence of the narcoculture in the growth and sustainment of organized criminal groups.

Luis Astorga, one of the most prolific writers on the subject, recounts in *Mitología del Narcotraficante en México*, that, prior to the 1970s, the narco-traffic was mainly present in the rural areas of Mexico, because the urban people did not see the narco-traffic as a legitimate activity. On the other hand, Mexicans living in rural areas were poor and starving, making drug trafficking an attractive option to support their families, thus legitimizing the trade. The legitimacy of the Mexican government was

¹⁰ Astorga, *Drug Trafficking in Mexico*, 35–75.

¹¹ Sánchez Godoy, *Institutionalizing Processes of the Narcoculture in Sinaloa*, 19–53.

¹² Vilalta, "How Did Things Get So Bad So Quickly?" 137–161; Astorga, *Mythology of "Drug Dealer" in Mexico*, 55; Valenzuela-Arce, *Boss of Bosses*, 20–66.

challenged as rural people were marginalized due to lack of social support, such as education and other elements of social mobility, falling prey to bitterness as the government and society ignored them. Therefore, narco-trafficking became their way of making a living, as well as delegitimizing a government that was unable to provide services.¹³ These factors parallel those present in countries and cultures where people are attracted to religious extremism and revolution.

In recent decades, scholars have recognized the importance of the narco-cultura, and study of this phenomenon spiked. Authors such as George Philip, Susana Berruecos, and Rose Pacatte define the subculture as centered on guns and money, characterized by sex, movies, music, and a heavy dose of popular religion.¹⁴ Philip and Berruecos assert that the term “narco-cultura” was coined in the 1970s and is loose and dynamic, with various regional differences within Mexico.¹⁵ Authors such as Nora Perez-Rayon see the narco-cultura as a code of conduct and lifestyle that creates an illusion whereby people believe that organized crime is the only way out of poverty.¹⁶ Elias Walt and others see the narcoculture as an illusion maintained primarily through the genre of narco-corridos.¹⁷ Desirée A. Martín notes that the narco-cultura is mainly embedded in the northern rural areas of Mexico and near the Mexican–U.S. border.¹⁸ In their article, Creechan and Herrán-García provide a careful analysis of the importance of narcoculture, especially the narco-saint Jesus Malverde, and assert that the most notorious organized-crime groups come from Mexico, including the Sinaloa cartel, La Familia Michoacána,

¹³ Astorga, *Mythology of “Drug Dealer” in Mexico*,” 15.

¹⁴ Rose Pacatte, “Narco Cultura Explores the Meaning of the War on Drugs.” *National Catholic Reporter* 50, no. 6(2014), 17–18; George Philip and Susana Berruecos, “Mexico’s Struggle for Public Security,” in *Organized Crime and State Responses*, ed. George Philip and Susana Berruecos New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012. <http://www.palgraveconnect.com/doi/10.1057/9781137034052>.

¹⁵ Philip and Berruecos, *Mexico’s Struggle for Public Security*, 4.

¹⁶ Nora Perez-Rayon. *Iglesia Católica, Estado y Narcotráfico. Un Desafío hacia el Siglo XXI* [Catholic Church, State and Drug Trafficking. A Challenge to the XXI Century], (Catholic Church. The State and Narcotics), *Sociologica* 21 no. 62 (2006), 140.

¹⁷ Elijah Wald, *Narco-Corrido: A Journey into the Music of Drugs, Guns, and Guerrillas*. (New York: Rayo, 2001), 5–53.

¹⁸ Martín, *Borderlands Saints*, 13–27.

and the Michoacána offshoot, Los Caballeros Templarios.¹⁹ These cartels have greatly changed the cultural setting by capitalizing their economic growth through money laundering, a criminal activity that has warped the political direction of Mexico.

Researchers who have spent years in Mexico studying drug cartels include Ioan Grillo, who tends to emphasize the importance of the narco-cultura, and Sylvia Langton, who provides an excellent historical background. Grillo's book asserts that the ongoing wars were created as narco-trafficking became a lucrative way to make a living for the Mexican people. Investigators in the field have different views regarding what constitutes a cartel. Langton sees a drug cartel as a gang that has grown out of control due to the profitability of the narco-traffic market; for Grillo, cartels are criminal groups. Longmire describes cartels as groups formed by radical individuals such as Al Qaeda and the FARC (*Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia*, the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia). Grillo explores the world of narco-corridos, drug ballads that romanticize the actions of drug lords and anti-government challengers, and the role of corrido singers—a risky profession. He also explores the cult of Santa Muerte, a narco-saint who favors the poor and narco-traffickers.²⁰

In examining cultural encounters and conflicts between Mexico's government and people, Lawrence Harrison, in his book, *Underdevelopment Is a State of Mind*, summarizes the discussion of frictions between the government and masses and offers a unique perspective. He blames the Mexican government for severe violence and corruption, which has made the population vulnerable to anti-social indoctrination. In this view, the corruption and violence of the Mexican government, or of certain distinct groups within society, is implicitly seen as the result, rather than the cause, of the friction between government and the people.²¹

¹⁹ Creechan and de la Herran-Garcia. "Without God or Law," 7.

²⁰ Jerry L. Langton, *Gangland: The Rise of the Mexican Drug Cartels from El Paso to Vancouver*, Canada (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2011), 21–42; Ioan Grillo, *El Narco: Inside Mexico's Criminal Insurgency*, (New York City, NY: Bloomsbury Press, 2011), 18–23; Sylvia Longmire, *Cartel: The Coming Invasion of Mexico's Drug Wars*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 12–45.

²¹ Lawrence E. Harrison, *Underdevelopment Is a State of Mind: The Latin American Case* (Lanham, MD: Harvard University and University Press of America, 1985), 18–23.

In light of government corruption and discrimination, some authors observe that the narco-cultura distinguishes itself by its own style of clothing, music, literature, film, religious beliefs, and practices that shape its identity, mainly among the lower-class and uneducated. They argue that those who take part in narco-cultura are not necessarily drug traffickers or criminals and point out that many of those involved in organized crime through the narco-cultura are members of marginalized sectors of society who adopt the appearance and behavior of drug traffickers to project some sort of power and social identity.²²

It is roundly acknowledged that organized crime has political, economic, ideological, religious, and cultural ramifications that extend from the impoverished to the highest executives in government. Organized-crime groups interact with society, and as the interaction grows, some of their behaviors are adopted by those within other social groups, which leads to cultural change and legitimization. As the narcoculture becomes legitimate, the community begins to accept certain aspects of it, and, over time, the cultural subset is absorbed into the larger society and viewed as normal. Authors have yet to address the connection between the integration of the narco-cultura in the Mexican society to the growth of organized crime groups in Mexico.²³

The phenomenon of the narco-cult, which centers around underground prayers to narco-saints, is seen to have evolved into open worship of guardian spirits, whom supplicants rely on for strength and protection from harm (i.e., from law enforcement and rival traffickers).²⁴ The narco-saints are more than just a dark adornment, but central figures in what Creechan and Herran-Garcia say is currently the fastest-growing religious movement in the world. It is not only the difficulty but also the kinds of problems that many Mexicans face that propels the growth of this movement. Narco-saints are the

²² America Y. Guevara, "Propaganda in Mexico's Drug War." *Journal of Strategic Security* 6, no. 5 (2013), 131–151; Creechan and de la Herran-Garcia. "Without God or Law, 19; Astorga, *Mitología del "Narcotraficante,"* 23–46; Valenzuela-Arce, *Boss of Bosses,* 29–41; Shawn Flanigan, Motivations and Implications of Community Service Provision by la Familia Michoacana. *Journal of Strategic Security* 7, no. 3, (2014), 70.

²³ Guevara, "Propaganda in Mexico's Drug War," 131–151; Astorga, *Mythology of "Drug Dealer" in Mexico,* 25–36; Langton, *Gangland: The Rise of the Mexican Drug Cartels,* 22–46

²⁴ Creechan and Herran-Garcia, "Without God or Law," 23.

patrons of activities such as money laundering, smuggling, and, in particular, drug trafficking.²⁵ They are a product of syncretism, specifically, a blending of Catholicism and popular tradition or indigenous religion.²⁶ Some of these figures are forthright patrons of illegal acts; others are church-recognized saints that narcos choose to pray to, holy figures asked to abet illegal activities.

In his recent book, *Understanding the Use of Afro-Caribbean and Mexican Religious Cultures in the Drug Wars*, Kail points out that the establishment of narco-religion has been possible due to overlaps and interactions between drug cartels and syncretic practices, which has resulted in a “spiritual mashup.” Cases such as the 1989 Matamoros in Mexico, narco-religious killings, which blended Afro-Caribbean and Latin-American religious practices, and more recent instances of Mexican cartel members hiring Voodoo practitioners to cast spells on rivals are examples of this phenomenon.²⁷ Kail lists the saints and narco-saints venerated in the Mexican narco-cult, citing Our Lady of Guadalupe, Juan Soldado, Santa Maria, Dr. Jose Gregorio Hernandez, San Toribio Romo, Santo Niño de Atocha, San Ramon, San Cipriano, San Martin de Porres, Los Tres Grandes, Saint Alexis, San Martin Caballero, Juan Minero, Don Juan Dinero, Jesus Malverde, Pancho Villa, Saint Judas Tadeo, San Simon, San Pascual, and San Miguel. While traditional Catholic and folk-saint veneration in Mexico was originally distinct from narco-trafficking, many elements have been appropriated by criminal elements such as La Familia Michoacana and Los Caballeros Templarios. At the same time, pseudo-Christian cults have been adopted, such as Santa Muerte, with reports of human sacrifice and Aztec religious practices, including the excoriation and cannibalism, as practiced by certain cartel factions. Kail asserts that religious practices from Africa and Latin America have been adopted for supernatural protection and guidance, through traditional rituals from Santeria, Palo Mayombe, Voodoo, and other syncretic religions.²⁸

²⁵ Creechan and Herran-Garcia, “Without God or Law,” 24.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 14.

²⁷ Tony M. Kail, *Narco-Cults: Understanding the Use of Afro-Caribbean and Mexican Religious Cultures in the Drug Wars* (Boca Raton, FL: Taylor & Francis Group, 2015), 3–55.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

Kail's work is not sugarcoated; it is a clear illustration of the flamboyant narco lifestyle in Mexico and the United States for criminals who have fully embraced the dark narco-cult practices. The extensive imagery of icons, logos, shrines, artifacts, and incident scenes are important for the recognition of the narco-cultura, the narco-saint, and the cartel, as some cartels are devoted to a specific saint. Additionally, torture, killing, and shrine desecration bring the very dangerous reality of drug gangs and cartel members to the fore. In Mexico, the killing of law-enforcement officers is extremely common, as is the wholesale corruption of entire police forces in cartel-owned towns and cities.²⁹

Because Mexican narco-cult plays a vital role in creating insecurity and violence, many authors have been attracted to its study. Traditionally, narco-saints have held important roles in periods of conflict; yet the narco-saints differ from official saints in how they answer to the uncertainty that people find in the Mexican legal system and omnipresence of organized crime.³⁰ Where a true Catholic saint might admonish the petitioner to turn from evil and wrongdoing, narco-saints are summoned for protection and harm to enemies. Narco-saints may be called upon by narcos and non-narcos alike, as the devotee clings to their hoped-for protection while being forced to operate on both sides of the law. Thus, narco-saint's devotees are not necessarily criminals, but may be ordinary people who have to cope and survive in difficult situations in a world infested with crime, injustice, unemployment, and drugs. Narco-saints offer followers a social platform of reciprocal exchanges with the supernatural that bypasses condoned ways of pleading the Catholic saints. In good times and bad, regardless of the reason, the saint's help may be implored. Devotees see narco-saints as supernatural agents without judgment—spirits offering protection, regardless of their walk in life. With saints such as these, the lawbreaker does not have to shy away from religion.

²⁹ Kail, *Narco-Cults*, 13–73.

³⁰ Creechan and Herran-Garcia, "Without God or Law," 6–32; Kail, *Narco-Cults*, 22–78; Marjorie Becker, *Setting the Virgin on Fire: Lázaro Cárdenas, Michoacán Peasants, and the Redemption of the Mexican Revolution*, (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 1996), 5–63; Regnar A. Kristensen, "La Santa Muerte in Mexico City: The Cult and its Ambiguities," *Journal of Latin American Studies* 47, no. 3 (2015), 543–566; Martín, *Borderlands Saints*, 13–42; Paul J. Vanderwood, *Juan Soldado: Rapist, Murderer, Martyr, Saint* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004).

Another part of the narco-cultura is the once subversive sub-genre of corridos known as narco-corridos, or drug ballads. To address narco-corridos as a form of musical expression, particularly in Sinaloa, some authors have studied its history and relationship with drug trafficking.³¹ These ballads romanticize trafficking activities and transmit the narco-cultura to the masses. The stories in narco-corridos may be based on real events. While the successes and failures of organized criminal groups are not always the central elements of narco-corridos, they are a common theme.³² The content typically concerns the elements of narco-cultural life: criminal offenses, economic struggles, organized crime as a source of employment and way of life, and challenges to the government.³³ They also address the consequences of drug trafficking—insecurity, violence, and the destruction of the social fabric that jeopardizes or influences health, education, the economy, security, and the culture, and which may lead to death by assassination.

Musician and critic Elijah Wald has little to say about drug policy, but his book “*Narcocorridos*” provokes interest in the cultural phenomenon to which the drug war has given rise. For Wald, the narco-corrido encourages acceptance of the narco lifestyle, reinforcing the collective ideologies of the narco-cultura.³⁴ Another position is that the narco-corrido advocates violence, drugs, narco-saints, and organized crime. Catherine Ragland states that, as a symbolic representation of the narco-cultura, the narco-corrido is decadent and dangerous and that they serve as a detonator of aggression and violence in the listener, which in turn fuels the narco-cultura.³⁵

Wald relates the Mexican corrido to the North American cowboy ballad, both of which descend from romantic ballads, but with a distinctive cultural touch. He lists *cantantes* (singers) such as Los Tigres del Norte, Chalino Sánchez, Luis y Julián, Grupo Exterminador, Jenni Rivera, Pedro Rivera, Los Hermanos Jiménez, El Canelo y los Dos

³¹ Valenzuela-Arce, *Jefe de Jefes*, 46–66; Luis Astorga, “Drug Traffic Ballads in Mexico and Colombia,” *Revista Mexicana De Sociología* 59, no. 4 (1997), 250–51; Wald, *Narco-corrido*, 13–78.

³² Astorga, “Drug Traffic Ballads, 250–51.

³³ Guevara, “Propaganda in Mexico’s Drug War,” 134.

³⁴ Wald, *Narco-Corrido*, 4–19,

³⁵ Catherine Ragland, *Música Norteña [Northern Music]: Mexican Migrants Creating a Nation between Nations*, (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2009), 23–54.

del Sitio, and Los Pajaritos del Sur. The narco-corrido stems from a musical genre in decay, particularly rural and, as such, held in contempt by the middle and upper classes of Mexican society. Wald argues that the 2006 war on drugs indirectly boosted the musical genre, which might have faded into the realm of the folklorist as a remnant of an earlier era. As Mexican narco-traffickers generated immense profits from illegal activities, they wanted to glamorized themselves and the flamboyant narco lifestyle through new luxury cars, expensive jewelry, and eye-catching houses, and narco-corridos. Narco-corridos gave the drug lords a platform from which to reach mythical status, through the lyrics that songwriters were forced to write on pain of death. The narco-corridos continued to transmit a message in the form of news and legends, particularly in the rural areas of Mexico, as occurred during the Mexican revolution.³⁶

While it is but one of the many artifacts created by the narco-cultura, this music creates an alternative perspective for understanding drug trafficking and the culture associated with it in Mexico today. Condemnation of the narco-corrido is found in public opinion, politics, and academic settings; clearly, it is a controversial musical genre that may be considered immoral, dangerous, and outrageous. Authors such as Simonett view the narco-corrido in the context of its social effects, as directly confronting the biggest problem in society: government illegitimacy and a distressed social order.³⁷ The narco-corrido underscores the vulnerability and corruption of the government and the depth of the social problems created by poverty, drug trafficking, bad governance, and the terrible narco-religion in the Mexican society.³⁸

D. POTENTIAL EXPLANATIONS AND HYPOTHESES

The forgoing review demonstrates that the literature on the narcoculture in Mexico, with its saints and corridos, offers promising insights into the economic, cultural, and social effects of organized-crime groups. How and why criminal groups use narco-cult to maintain their growth, however, has been inadequately explored. The research

³⁶ Wald, *Narco-Corrido*, 12–58.

³⁷ Simonett, “Giving Voice to the ‘Dignified Man,’” 234–41.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

question and literature review raise three important areas for consideration—the narco-cultura overall, cults and saints, and narco-corridos—to identify factors that influence the growth of criminal groups in Mexico.

The first area of interest is the narco-cultura—the overarching culture that reflects the real-life violence of the drug wars. This culture promotes living it up like a drug trafficker, or narco, a cruel alternative for the people of Mexico, but also a compelling opportunity to make a living. Drug cartels are continually fighting to dominate areas and expand their operations, in particular, those adjacent to the United States border. The glamorization of their lifestyle functions as a recruiting tool, winning the minds and hearts of those who are poor and marginalized by the Mexican government. It represents an opportunity to exit the misery of poverty. The narco-cultura is a heartless one, in which, if you owe money today, you will be killed tomorrow. The first hypothesis of this research is that these crimes are systemic and indicate a much greater evil—one that blurs the lines between organized crime and the government. Mexicans live with a government that is incapable of providing protection and adequate economic support. This thesis proposes to examine the reasons individuals continue to adopt a violent cultural response and turn to the drug trade, positing that individuals with few economic or educational opportunities join the cartels as an alternative society in which to make a lot of money quickly through crime and to express their bitter resentment of the government.³⁹

The second hypothesis is the spiritual aspect of the narco-cultura and the growing devotion to folk saints. Followers pray for protection for themselves or loved ones in the dangerous drug trade. If an individual is part of the narco-cultura, a corresponding level of personal devotion to the narco-saints must be offered to realize the benefit of these spirits. This thesis examines levels of engagement among individuals who venerate narco-saints and evaluates whether their participation is a driving factor in their involvement with the narco lifestyle. The hypothesis is that individuals appeal to narco-saints once they are part of the narco-cultura. If this is the case, the question is why. While other reasons may come into play, this thesis examines the narco-cult as an

³⁹ Guevara, “Propaganda in Mexico’s Drug War,” 134; Valenzuela-Arce, *Boss of Bosses*, 12–63; Pacatte, “Narco Cultura,” 17–18; Philip and Berruecos, *Mexico’s Struggle for Public Security*, 13–28.

alternative belief and folk religion. Framing the problem in this way allows use of the body of literature on the narco-saints.

Finally, the third hypothesis is that narco-corridos music glorifies drug lords and the narco lifestyle and strengthens organized crime groups. In these ballads, drug trafficking is glamorized and the narco-cultura is transmitted through valorized stories. Though they also talk about the baneful consequences of drug trafficking—the insecurity, violence, and destruction of the social fabric that jeopardizes or influences health, education, the economy, security, and the culture—this thesis proposes that narco-corridos are used to attract recruits, gain acceptance from the masses, and maintain crime-group viability.

E. RESEARCH DESIGN

While the literature is short on examples of how the narco-cultura appropriates religion and religious symbolism, historical examples of lifestyle components, corridos, and saints are readily accessible. These offer an excellent means of analyzing the growth and maintenance of organized criminal groups in Mexico. I intend to analyze the coalescence of the narco-cultura to identify elements that fall at different points in narco-cultura evolution, such as of narco-saints (Jesus Malverde, La Santa Muerte, and Juan Soldado), corrido singers (Chalino Sanchez, El Komander, and Movimiento Alterado), and organized-crime groups (La Familia Michoacana and Los Caballeros Templarios). Beyond those described in the literature review, sources will include a broad mix of academic articles and books, in particular from the Mexican press and film. The latter includes *Narco Cultura*, a 2013 documentary. These sources not only offer insights into the narcoculture as conventional described, but also insider views and comprehensive explanations of the phenomenon and how it relates to organized-crime growth and sustainment

F. THESIS OVERVIEW

The thesis contains four chapters. Chapter II explores La Familia Michoacana and Los Caballeros Templarios and their religious cults. Chapter III examines how the Sinaloa cartel uses narco-corridos, in particular Los Tigres del Norte (a singing group) to

recruit members, and how they embrace the cult of Jesus Malverde. Chapter IV investigates the role of narco-saints and the reason individuals seek help from unofficial “saints” that distort traditional spiritual practices and serve specific cultural needs.

II. UNDERSTANDING LA FAMILIA MICHOACÁNA AND LOS CABALLEROS TEMPLARIOS, AND THEIR RELIGIOUS CULTS

To appreciate the distinctive qualities of the narco-cultura, Latin American experts do well to study the history, structure, culture, and, in particular, the religious cults associated with some cartels. La Familia Michoacána and Los Caballeros Templarios, though now largely disbanded, employed compelling, cult-like regimes rooted in the broader Christian tradition in order to create and maintain legitimacy. Study of these groups affords insight to how gruesome, horrific practices under the color of religious belief may be made acceptable, and even compelling, to a needy population that supports its stated motivations. This chapter discusses the rise of these cartels, their social context, and their cult-like practices, and the historical background and relationship between legitimate religion and organized crime groups—in particular, La Familia Michoacán and Los Caballeros Templarios.

A. THE EVOLUTION OF LA FAMILIA MICHOACÁNA AND LOS CABALLEROS TEMPLARIOS

1. Historical Background

The religious cultural background of Mexico is one of struggle against the secularist, anti-Catholic, and anticlerical policies of Mexico's post-revolutionary government. Anticlericalism has been a recurring issue in Mexico since independence from Spain in 1821, stemming from constant changes in government and the state's willingness to seize Church properties and riches.⁴⁰ After independence, Mexico was organized as a confessional state, that is, one that formally practices a particular religion or that at least inspires its citizens to do so. In 1824, Roman Catholicism became the official religion of the nation per Title I (Sole Section: of the Mexican Nation, its Territory and Religion), Article 3 of the first constitution of the United States of Mexico.⁴¹ After the Revolt of Ayutla in 1854, which was aimed at the removal of dictator

⁴⁰ Sidney Z. Ehler, *Church and State through the Centuries* (New York: Biblo & Tannen, 1988), 579.

⁴¹ Federal Constitution of the United Mexican States (1824), Tarlton Law Library, accessed on 16 February 2016, <http://tarlton.law.utexas.edu/constitutions/mexican1824/t1s1>.

Antonio López de Santa Anna, a majority of the political leaders in Mexico adopted anticlerical sentiments.⁴² In 1857, a new constitution aimed at the removal of Church property rights unleashed a civil war. With the help of French military intervention, conservative elements tried to launch a Mexican empire; however, in 1867, the French-born puppet emperor, Maximilian, was executed, giving way to a succession of anti-clerical regimes.⁴³ In 1917, another constitution hostile towards the church and religion generally was adopted; targeting clerics because of the support, they gave to the dictatorship of Victoriano Huerta (1913–14).⁴⁴ The resulting societal dilemma was vividly felt in Michoacán, where peasants were actively engaged with their parishes, in particular as devotees of *La Virgen María* (the Virgin Mary) as of the rest of Catholicism. The constitution banned any education by the church, gave control over church matters and properties to the state, banned religious decrees, prohibited foreign priests, and gave states the power to constrain or dispose of clerics at will. The clerics' privileges of voting and holding office were denied; they were restricted from holding religious celebrations and denied the right of trial for alleged infringements of these provisions.⁴⁵ President Vicente Fox notes, "After 1917, Mexico was led by anti-Catholic Freemasons who tried to evoke the anticlerical spirit of popular indigenous president Benito Juárez of the 1880s. But the military dictators of the 1920s were a lot more savage than Juárez."⁴⁶ This period was stained by the execution of priests who attempted to perform their pastoral and clerical duties.

The resentment of the people against this harsh persecution gave birth to the Cristero War (1926–1929), between fighting Catholics, known as *Cristeros*, and the implementation of suppressive legislation by President Plutarco Elías Calles,⁴⁷ which

⁴² Michael S. Werner, *Concise Encyclopedia of Mexico*, (Oxford, New York: Taylor and Francis, 2001), 88.

⁴³ Ehler, *Church and State through the Centuries*, 579.

⁴⁴ John Lear, *Workers, Neighbors, and Citizens: the Revolution in Mexico City* (Nebraska: University Press, 2001), 261.

⁴⁵ Ehler, *Church and State through the Centuries*, 579–81.

⁴⁶ Vicente Fox, and Rob Allyn, *Revolution of Hope: The Life, Faith, and Dreams of a Mexican President*, (New York: Viking Adult, 2007), 17.

⁴⁷ Ehler, *Church and State through the Centuries*, 580.

required priests to obtain a license to practice and limited their numbers. As result of these manipulative tactics, whole territories were left without priests and Church infrastructure was largely at government disposal. The Mexican bishops, as a last resort, advised the faithful to protest the persecution of their faith.⁴⁸ Pope Pius XI transmitted the encyclical “Iniquis Afflictisque” denouncing government oppression of clerics and the faithful.⁴⁹ On January 1, 1927, a religious rebellion commenced. Crying “¡Viva Cristo Rey! (Long Live Christ the King!),” many Cristeros (and innocent bystanders) were executed during anticlerical retaliation by the government.⁵⁰ The persecution turned more atrocious in the government of Tomás Garrido Canabal, an infamous governor of Tabasco. Anti-clericalism reached its peak as Garrido’s regime organized a fascist brigade, the Red Shirts, to terrorize Roman Catholics.⁵¹ The Catholic Church has beatified as martyrs many of those murdered in the Cristero revolt—for instance, Miguel Pro, a Jesuit priest executed by firing squad on trumped-up charges in 1927 and canonized in 1988. Calles used the killing of this priest to extort the Cristeros to surrender; it had the opposite effect, however, inspiring others to follow Father Pro into martyrdom for Christ. In 2000, the Vatican beatified another 25 priests who refused to fight and chose to stay with their congregations, even unto death. Scheina notes that the war devastated the Church between 1926 and 1934. In 1934, for example, the government licensed only 334 priests to take care of 15 million parishioners; and any unlicensed priest faced a grim fate.⁵²

Becker argues that during the *Cardinista* period of 1934–1940, the dilemma of President Lázaro Cárdenas was revealed: “until he and his followers understood peasant

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Philippe Levillain, *The Papacy: An Encyclopedia*, (Abingdon-on-Thames, UK: Routledge, 2002), 1208.

⁵⁰ Robert Barron (Bishop), “Viva Cristo Rey! [Hail Christ The King]” Catholic News Agency, 20 June 2012, <http://www.catholicnewsagency.com/column/viva-cristo-rey-2196/>.

⁵¹ Stan Ridgeway, “Monoculture, Monopoly, and the Mexican Revolution: Tomás Garrido Canabal and the Standard Fruit Company in Tabasco (1920–1935),” *Mexican Studies/estudios Mexicanos* 17 (2001), 143–69, doi:10.1525/msem.2001.17.1.143.

⁵² Robert L. Scheina, *Latin America's Wars: The Age of the Caudillo, 1791–1899*, (Lincoln, NE: Potomac Books, 2003), 33.

culture, they could not govern.”⁵³ Typical of this period is the interaction between Cardenas’s plan and the *campesinos* (peasants) of northwestern Michoacán, which was characterized by suppression on religion and education. Becker refutes the styling of Cárdenas “as something of a latter-day Jesus, a redeemer who traveled from village to village performing wonders.”⁵⁴ According to this narrative, Cárdenas was a mythological being who created reforms and brought the revolution to realization. By contrast, Becker argues that Cárdenas planned to deliver the peasants from their social neglect to undermine the popular devotion that had produced the Cristeros revolt—a plan the peasants did not embrace. Under Cárdenas, the government offered lands to the peasants in exchange for loyalty, which many men accepted; but the women clung to their devotion to La Virgen María.⁵⁵ After a long wait, the *campesinos* established a fragile cooperation with the Cardenista regime; however, they were reluctant to collaborate until their cultural ideologies were respected. The *campesinos* “taught Cardenas that ideological conformity was not necessary for governmental control.”⁵⁶ Cardenas learned the importance of acknowledging the cultural identity of the *campesinos* in shaping the state. Becker contends that these *campesinos* continually affirmed that they would not surrender their sacraments, and claims that any sensitivity in post-revolutionary government “is largely due to the Michoacán peasantry.”⁵⁷

In the mid-twentieth century, violent oppression of the Church decreased, but repression nevertheless continued. Donald notes that by 1940, the Church had no schools, real estate, monasteries, or rights in court. The clergy were loosely forbidden to vote, perform religious ceremonies, or wear clerical garb.⁵⁸ Hostilities towards the Church were reduced in the presidential regime of Manuel Ávila Camacho (1940–46), who proposed to relax some anticlerical provisions (with the exception of Article 30, Section

⁵³ Becker, *Setting the Virgin on Fire*, 3.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 248.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 1.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 162.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

⁵⁸ Donald J. Mabry, “Mexican Anticlerics, Bishops, Cristeros, the Devout during the 1920s: A Scholarly Debate,” *Journal of Church and State* 20 (1978), 82.

9, of the constitution) in exchange for peace. The Article 30, Section 9 exception deprived the clergy of the right to engage in political discourse, vote, or pursue free political association. In 1991, President Salinas removed from the constitution most of the anticlerical provisions, and in 1992, his amendments were passed by the parliament. One key aspect of historical religious persecution in Mexico is that it created deep animosity towards government corruption and religious solidarity among the people. In Michoacán, it moreover taught the people to defend their religious freedom boldly, regardless of cost and the people learned to defend fiercely their religious freedom and practices.

When looking at these cartels, history matters as an unavoidable reality. Religion has been of the most important characteristics of Mexico's historical background and at the same time, it is one of the key ingredients in shaping Michoacan cartels. It is important to look at history to understand where these cult-like religious philosophies come from. It helps to understand the events that have occurred, the struggles that have shaped the Mexican culture and these religious cartels, which allows us to see why they do what they do, and why they include religion in their activities. It allows making sense of the story and understanding why Mexicans see the government as an enemy and the "bandit" as a hero. The myths, legends, and religious ideals that have spread among the people explain their reaction to the events in their land and make the study of these cartels relevant to understand why narcos do what they do and why they continue to do it.

2. La Familia Michoacána: Background, Leadership, and Enforced Silence

La Familia Michoacána or, as it is also known, La Familia, formed in the 1980s and became one of Mexico's strongest cartels to bring order and justice to the Michoacán state, in particular, and to help and protect the innocent from other cartels and the government.⁵⁹ The group rapidly acquired notoriety because of its prodigal violence and

⁵⁹ John P. Sullivan and Samuel Logan, "Mexico's Divine Justice." International Relations and Security Network, August 17, 2009, <http://www.isn.ethz.ch/Digital-Library/Articles/Detail/?id=104677&lng=en>.

strangely religious ideology.⁶⁰ The stated purpose of La Familia's formation was to bring "divine justice" to the poor. They did not kill for money or kill women; they claimed to protect the innocent and to judge those who deserved to die.⁶¹ Its founders, Carlos Rosales Mendoza and Nazario Moreno González, known as "El Más Loco" (the craziest), turned the cartel into a quasi-religious group and preached with a Bible in hand to emphasize their divine right to kill and dismember their enemies.⁶² El Más Loco used this religious propaganda as a tool to promote indoctrinate La Familia's religious philosophy and legitimize its cause. Since the '80s, La Familia has exploited the divine-justice myth and its legendary status to accrue power, inevitably transitioning into an incredibly violent cartel. La Familia was mainly formed as a group of vigilantes with the intent of countering kidnappers and drug dealers who were harassing the people of Michoacán. These vigilantes, known as the "autodefensa" (self-defense group), claimed that the government had failed to protect the people from organized crime and provide adequate social services.⁶³ After forming as La Familia, these vigilantes continued to fight the drug cartels and filled the security gap, driving the pseudo-religious cartel Los Caballeros Templarios out of western Michoacán and bordering areas.⁶⁴

La Familia became notorious in the 1990s as it allied with the Gulf Cartel to wrest control from competing narco-trafficking cartels in the state of Michoacán. After splitting with the Gulf Cartel in 2006, La Familia waged an intense battle with rivals such as the Beltrán-Leyva, Los Zetas, Juárez, and Tijuana cartel,⁶⁵ meanwhile establishing good relations with the Sinaloa cartel of Joaquin "El Chapo" Guzman. As La Familia extended

⁶⁰ United States Congressional Research Service, "Mexico's Drug Trafficking Organizations: Source and Scope of the Rising Violence," 7 September 2011, <http://www.refworld.org/docid/4e96b8922.html>.

⁶¹ James C. McKinley Jr., "Mexican Drug War Turns Barbaric, Grisly," *New York Times*, October 26, 2006, www.nytimes.com.

⁶² Steve Fainaru and William Booth, "A Mexican Cartel's Swift and Grisly Climb," *Washington Post*, June 13, 2009, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/>.

⁶³ Sullivan and Logan, "Mexico's Divine Justice."

⁶⁴ Don Knowland, "Battles between Drug Cartels and Vigilante Groups Destabilize Mexico," *WSWS.org*, 29 March 2014, <https://www.wsws.org/en/articles/2014/03/29/mexi-m29.html>.

⁶⁵ Ildefonso Ortiz, "Gulf Cartel Lieutenant's Associates Enter Plea Agreement." *The Monitor*, 13 December 2011, http://www.themonitor.com/gulf-cartel-lieutenant-s-associates-enter-plea-agreement/article_710eeded-5b64-58d3-bdd5-f4976996aea0.html.

its area of operation, its leaders claimed to be undertaking the Lord's work, taking divine justice into their hands in Michoacán. It captured enemies and rivals, torturing, mutilating, and decapitating them, often leaving their heads without corpses in public places as a sign of warning.

In 2009 and 2010, La Familia offered to stand down from illegal activities and disperse, on the condition that the Mexican government, including the state and federal police, guarantee security for the people of Michoacán. President Felipe Calderón's government rejected the deal and the cartel calls for negotiation. La Familia had considerable influence in the politics of Michoacán, financially supporting their favorite candidates and attacking and intimidating challengers into abandoning their candidacies. The Mexican police in the state of Aguascalientes captured La Familia's leader, El Chango, on 21 June 2011, and declared that the cartel was disbanded, and following a string of government victories against La Familia, the group's leaders have broken off. The scattered organization, however, continues to influence the Michoacán state.⁶⁶

After the death of El Más Loco on 9 December 2010, José de Jesús Méndez Vargas, "El Chango," took command of La Familia; cartel co-founders, Servando Gómez Martínez ("La Tuta"), Enrique Plancarte Solís, and Dionisio Loya Plancarte disbanded, however, and formed an offshoot proclaiming itself "*Los Caballeros Templarios*" (the Knights Templar), becoming another quasi-religious criminal group in Michoacán state.⁶⁷ Los Caballeros Templarios assumed the territory of La Familia, which operated in Baja California, Colima, Guanajuato, Guerrero, Jalisco, Michoacán, Morelos, Querétaro, and the state of Mexico, and started to control politics and commerce (see Figure 1). Government reports indicate that the leader of Los Caballeros, La Tuta, was arrested on 27 February 2015, having evaded authorities for over a year after the federal government

⁶⁶Rene Hernandez and Catherine E. Shoichet, "Top cartel leader captured," CNN, 22 June 2011, http://edition.cnn.com/2011/WORLD/americas/06/21/mexico.cartel.capture/index.html?hpt=hp_t2.

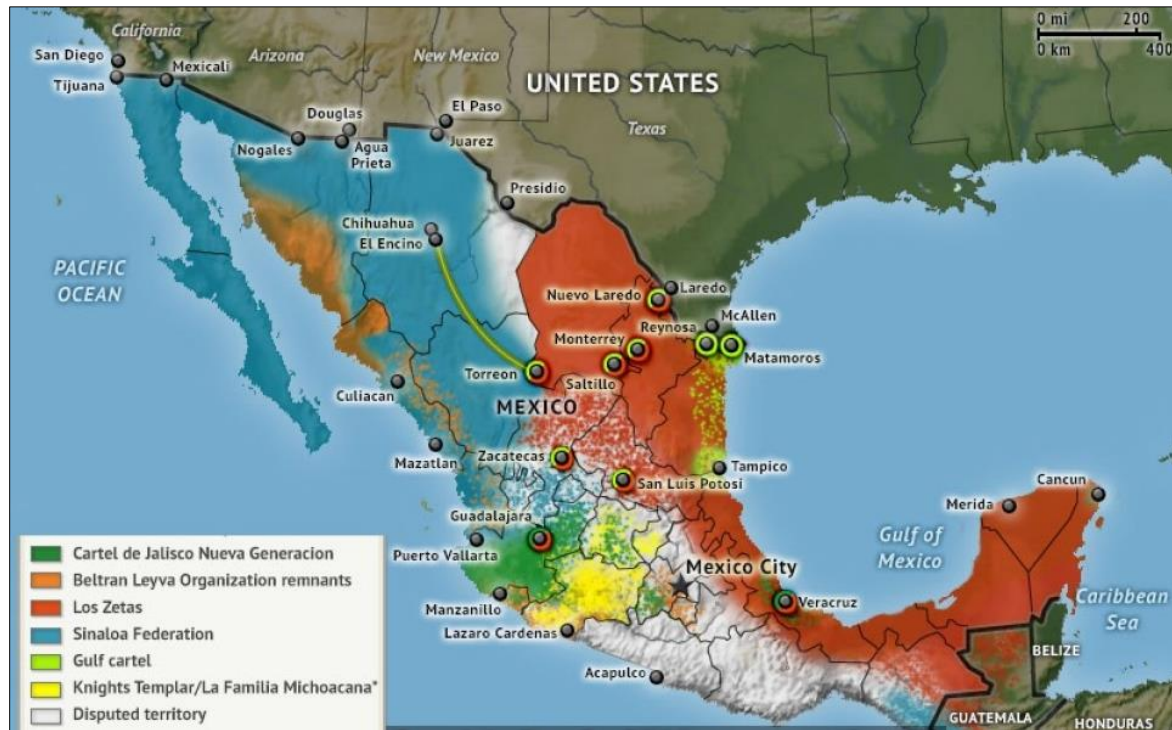
⁶⁷ Henia Prado, "Prevén Arrecie Lucha por Lugar del 'Chayo' en Michoacán" [Provide Arrecie Struggle for Place of 'Chayo' in Michoacan], *Reforma (in Spanish) (Terra)*, 29 May 2011, <http://noticias.terra.com.mx/mexico/seguridad/preven-arrecie-lucha-por-lugar-del-chayo-en-michoacan,06391d47603df310VgnCLD200000bbceeb0aRCRD.html>.

took control of Michoacán in an attempt to reinstate social order.⁶⁸ La Tuta, a former schoolteacher, was one of Mexico's most hunted criminals, controlling the most profitable methamphetamine trade, particularly in the state of Michoacán, through the extortion of businesses and political leaders. The diverse techniques practiced by La Familia on traders, businessmen, and citizens were mainly conducted by telephone from prison—or an armed group might just show up demanding its biweekly or monthly quota.

Los Caballeros Templarios used the social foundation created by La Familia to anoint themselves “the protectors of Michoacán,” accusing their principal enemy, Los Zetas, of extorting, killing, and spreading violence in the state. Los Caballeros spread to neighboring areas and rapidly diversified its criminal activities, incorporating kidnapping, extortion, and quota collections from merchants, taxi drivers, and businessmen. The cartel influenced municipal elections, state officials, and labor groups, which, in turn, worked for the organization. Unlike La Familia, Los Caballeros Templarios became experts in recording government officials, giving interviews, and making videos with public figures as a mechanism for intimidation and extortion. A unique aspect of Los Caballeros Templarios was the drafting of a code of conduct, in which pseudo-religious rituals were prescribed for member initiation, along with a mandatory oath. This code calls adherents to fight poverty, tyranny and injustice—while at the same time the group was responsible for murders, extortion, and drug trafficking. The decline of Los Caballeros on February 2015 began with the capture of its principal leaders and the indictment of local politicians who were bribed to provide protection.

⁶⁸ “Mexico Nabs Head of Quasi-Religious Drug Cartel,” CBS News, 27 February 2015, <http://www.cbsnews.com/news/mexico-drug-lord-servando-la-tuta-gomez-arrested-official-says/>.

Figure 1. Mexican Cartels: Areas of Influence/Control



Source: “Drug Cartels: Decoding Mexico’s Biggest Criminal Syndicates,” Aljazeera America, 20 November 2014, <http://america.aljazeera.com/articles/2014/11/20/mexico-drug-cartels.html>.

The Michoacán cartels enforced public silence by violent retribution inflicted on those who voiced frustration and indignation. The people were tired of violence, and some stated openly that Michoacán was better off without the cartels. Kail notes that Los Caballeros Templarios used narco-mantas, banners containing cartels messages, to apologize to those who discontented with the group’s actions, claiming that they were at the service of Michoacán citizens. But it warned those whom they judged to be corrupted citizens, police, and military that they would suffer the consequences at the edge of the sword.⁶⁹ There are tales of those who spoke against groups outside the states who were mutilated by cutting out of their tongues and sowing shut of their mouths or by being shot dead. A cult-like example is the closed-mouth spell that is performed to keep them from talking about them.⁷⁰ This spell uses animal tongues nailed shut on trees using the law of

⁶⁹ Kail, *Narco Cult*, 239.

⁷⁰ Kail, *Narco Cult*, 282.

similarity in which the animal tongues represent that of those talking about them.⁷¹ Everyone knew that talking about these groups would bring disaster. These narratives were passed by word of mouth among the people, which created legends about the cartels and glorified their actions. Brutal killings and mutilations, dead-body messaging, and other nightmarish practices shaped social behavior and forced people to keep their mouths shut, providing a chilling lesson as to what was acceptable from those who do not support the cartels—namely, passive silence—and by implying that the cartels had eyes and ears everywhere.

3. The Provision of Services and the “Us versus Them” Divide

The recurring bargain in La Familia and Los Caballeros Templarios behavior and discourse was provision of services in exchange for protection and dispute resolution.⁷² The divine-justice code was implemented to “protect” the various sectors in society, thus inevitably inculcating the code among the Michoacán people. So-called security provision and protection quotas were an illegal activity by which the cartels employed counterfeiting, extortion, money laundering, etc., to force the victim to take a bribe or a bullet.⁷³ Quotas were charged mainly to business owners and street vendors in exchange for protection against being hurt, or even murdered, by other criminal groups. While this was clearly extortion, La Familia and Los Caballeros called it protection. The people of Michoacán, meanwhile, resorted to these organized crime groups to resolve problems and disputes, due to lack of confidence in the police and government. La Familia and Los Caballeros Templarios charged for their problem-resolution services and to security guarantees, taking advantage of the limited ability of the police or government to address social or individual problems.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Edgardo Buscaglia, “La Familia ha Capitalizado Estrategia Anticrimen Fallida [Family has Capitalized Failed Anti-Crime Strategy],” *El Universal.mx*, 20 July 2009, <http://archivo.eluniversal.com.mx/notas/613480.html>.

⁷³ William Finnegan, “Silver or Lead,” *New Yorker*, 31 May 2010, http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2010/05/31/100531fa_fact_finnegan; George W. Grayson, “La Familia Drug Cartel: Implications for U.S.-Mexican Security [Family has Capitalized Failed Anti-Crime Strategy],” Strategic Studies Institute, December 2010, <http://www.strategicstudiesinstitute.army.mil/pdffiles/PUB1033.pdf>.

These groups enacted the spectrum of extortion, from end to end. George W. Grayson mentioned in an interview with *El Universal's* article entitled “*Paga o Muere*” (“Pay or Die”) exposed the extortion schemes, reporting that many business owners had filed grievances with the police,⁷⁴ the police did nothing to act on these complaints and guarantee public safety. These cases merely demonstrated the modus operandi of La Familia and Los Caballeros, by which raw power was made legitimate. Persons who complained to the police were “visited” and given an ultimatum, as well as a price increase for protection—paga o muere was applied. There were cases in which criminals were captured and, when interrogated as to extortion charges, claimed they came in a strictly peaceful manner, to restore order in places where the police had failed.⁷⁵ This defense provides a clear example of the extent to which the ideology professed by higher echelons of these groups was absorbed in the lower ranks.

The cartels used media to create a divide among the population, with the intention of challenging the legitimacy of the government and gaining legitimacy for themselves. These criminal groups molded the perceptions of ordinary people, establishing their views as final and claiming authority over the territory they controlled. The promotion of their perspective through stories, missives, and actions was critical in controlling the popular evaluation of governmental power and undermining its ability to be effective. La Familia and Los Caballeros Templarios put the government’s power and safety provisions in doubt, meanwhile making some attempt to fill the gap between governmental powers and popular need.

La Familia used a wide-range of strategies to promote their views through images, narratives, and songs, which give the people a clear picture of the consequences should someone commit an act of crime against the innocent. Their influence over the understanding of authority and violence was a tool that kept past problems and violence alive in stories and myth and glorified the group’s achievements and valor in the face of

⁷⁴ “Paga o Muere: Tradición de La Familia [Pay or Die: The Family Tradition]” *El Universal*.mx, 22 February 2009, <http://www.eluniversal.com.mx/nacion/165909.html>.

⁷⁵ George W. Grayson, *Mexico: Narco-Violence and a Failed State?* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2010), 57.

injustice.⁷⁶ To the cartel, the means used to create a safe Michoacán justified the consequences. Their narco-propaganda and dissemination of cartel ideology was intended not only to question government legitimacy, but also to seduce the minds and hearts of the people.

The interpretation of power and legitimacy promoted by La Familia and Los Caballeros Templarios create what Jabri refers to as an “us versus them” divide, in which “we” are just and “they” are unjust.⁷⁷ La Familia and Los Caballeros Templarios create a “good Samaritan” image of themselves to support their divine-justice activities and image of themselves as champions against the weak Mexican government and rival cartels such as Los Zetas. Social scientist Carlos Antonio Flores Pérez observes:

La Familia’s public condemnations of certain ills have helped it gain ground on what is effectively “psychological warfare,” and win social legitimacy in a state plagued by violence. La Familia is instituting its own actions to build social roots ... It’s a strategy to win over the goodwill of the people in areas in which it operates.⁷⁸

In this respect, it is clear that these groups wanted to establish their view of the government and its legitimacy as unquestioned. Nevertheless, Perez asks lingering questions: “I still don’t know what exactly they do. What is the mystique of this organization? Do they want total anarchy or social change, or what?”⁷⁹ Apparently, what La Familia and Los Caballeros Templarios wanted to do was exploit the security gap in Mexican society, co-opting roles that the government could not fulfill, in the name of divine justice.

The us-versus-them concept was accepted where the people supported the cartels and perceived them as good Samaritans. In other towns and cities, however, this view was unwelcome; the cartels were regarded as the bandits, while the government was

⁷⁶ Bettina E. Schmidt and Ingo W. Schröder, “Introduction: Violent Imaginaries and Violent Practices,” in *Anthropology of Violence and Conflict*, ed. Bettina E. Schmidt and Ingo E. Schröder (London: Routledge, 2001), 3.

⁷⁷ Vivienne Jabri, *Discourses on Violence: Conflict Analysis Reconsidered* (Manchester UP, 1996), 68.

⁷⁸ George W. Grayson and Samuel Logan, *The Executioner’s Men: Los Zetas, Rogue Soldiers, Criminal Entrepreneurs, and the Shadow State They Created*, (New Brunswick: Transaction, 2012), 99.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

viewed as the Samaritan.⁸⁰ In cases where these groups did not have the support of the population, the concept of “*plata o plomo*” (silver or lead) came into play, which Finnegan summarizes as giving local officials the choice of bribe or bullet.⁸¹ Jabri states that these groups made it very clear that refusal to take part in cartel plans was considered unfaithfulness to society, and therefore deserving of divine justice.⁸² According to this concept, La Familia and Los Caballeros Templarios forced the people to submit to their ways and take violent action against those who challenged their authority—these groups expected that social entities would do as they were told to legitimize cartel power. Grayson writes, “at least some Michoacáños have bought into La Familia’s message that the troublemakers, the killers, the bad guys, are outsiders—not locals, or heaven forbid, La Familia itself.”⁸³ There is no doubt that these groups were very violent, and the people know that; their methods created fear and intimidation, which in turn created legitimacy.

4. Economic, Social and Cultural Context: Understanding Complexities

The Michoacán economy is composed mainly of commercial, steel, agricultural, and fishing sectors. According to the United Nations Development Program (UNDP), these industries’ participation in gross domestic product (GDP) breaks down as follows:

- 42% social, community, hospitality, and trade
- 15% financial and real-estate services
- 14% manufacturing, especially the primary-metals industry
- 11% agriculture and fishing⁸⁴

⁸⁰ Finnegan, *Silver or Lead*.

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² Jabri, *Discourses on Violence*, 73.

⁸³ Grayson, “La Familia Drug Cartel,” 111.

⁸⁴ “Informe Sobre Desarrollo Humano Michoacán 2007 [2007 Report of Human Development in Michoacan],” United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), http://hdr.undp.org/sites/default/files/idh_michoacan_2007.pdf, 4.

The residents of Michoacán are mainly employed in three sectors: “agriculture (34%), mining and manufacturing (23%), and commerce (37%).”⁸⁵ According to a study conducted by the National Institute of Statistics and Geography (INEGI) through the National Survey of Occupation and Employment (ENOE), Michoacán recorded an average unemployment rate in the third quarter of 2007 of 3.7%, which was ranked as the lowest unemployment in the country.⁸⁶ While Michoacán does not have reliable indicators of unemployment, it does have significant salary inequality.

Despite low unemployment in the state, UNDP points out that existing jobs are not well paid. About 35% of employees have a salary equal to or less than twice the minimum wage, while about 55% received less than three times the minimum wage and only 7% of workers received more than five times the minimum wage. In Michoacán, as in all other Mexican states, poverty and income inequality are strong indicators in an individual’s decision to resort to organized crime. Regarding the quality of jobs, 79% of the working population does not have employer-provided health insurance, whether private or public.⁸⁷ Coeval statistical figures for 2005 found Michoacán in tenth place among those Mexican states with the highest level of food poverty, with a ratio of 23.3% or five percentage points, above the national average of 18.2%. Moreover, 54.5% of the Michoacán population lived in patrimonial poverty and more than 50% in alimentary poverty, placing the state among the top ten with the highest poverty rate of these types.⁸⁸ Unemployment in 2015 was recorded at 3.7%, which is the equivalent of 63,000 people, as reported by INEGI.⁸⁹

Professor Gonzalez Ruiz, a former Mexican deputy-attorney general and organized crime expert, argues that territories with economic inequality, such as Michoacán, are seedbeds for the development of organized crime groups such as La

⁸⁵ “2007 Report of Human Development in Michoacan,” United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), http://hdr.undp.org/sites/default/files/idh_michoacan_2007.pdf, 4.

⁸⁶ National Institute of Statistics and Geography (INEGI), “Michoacán: Encuesta Nacional de Ocupación y Empleo (ENOE) [Michoacan: National Survey of Occupation and Employment],” <http://www3.inegi.org.mx/sistemas/temas/default.aspx?s=est&c=25433&t=1>.

⁸⁷ UNDP, *Report of Human Development in Michoacan 2007*, 5.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 84.

⁸⁹ INEGI, “Michoacan: National Survey of Occupation and Employment.”

Familia.⁹⁰ Fundamental social services from the government are required for the subsistence of the population. In cases where the government fails to provide such services, non-state actors such as La Familia and Los Caballeros Templarios may appear and fill the gap, in accordance with the concept of “us-versus-them.” As a result, Scalia, a UN advisor, argues that La Familia infiltrated 85% of the economic sectors in Michoacán and its surroundings as represented by Guerrero and Guanajuato La Familia. This drug cartel was not only leading in violence and drug trafficking, but developed economic components that gave them the strength to sponsor illegal actions and develop a social army.⁹¹ Buscaglia points out that the expansion and legitimacy of these groups is explained by the inefficiency of the Mexican government in providing essential public services. Through the years, the government has implemented a poor strategy based on the capture of cartel members; by contrast, Buscaglia argues that governments have to dismantle the traditions and beliefs of criminal organizations to succeed.⁹²

La Familia and Los Caballeros Templarios reached out to the needy and marginalized in their most active years. La Familia had an important dimension of social protection, which includes that of the population. They invested heavily in building social infrastructure that benefitted the marginalized sectors of the region, including irrigation canals, churches, schools, road paving and drainage, and job creation, as many of their members owned hotels and companies.⁹³ Thus, these organizations won the minds and hearts in the region via the provision of social services, and received loyalty in exchange. The failure of the government to provide standard services and their fulfillment by criminal groups were the underlying factors in the creation of an “us-versus-them divide” and, ultimately, the erosion of government legitimacy.

The cultural background of Mexico explains why certain beliefs have prevailed. Sullivan notes that bandits are a classic element in Mexican politics. Certainly, bandits are an essential narrative element in the counter-Mexican struggle with drug lords and

⁹⁰ Stephen Gibbs, “Family Values’ of Mexico Drug Gang,” BBC, 22 October 2009, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/americas/8319924.stm>.

⁹¹ Buscaglia, “Family has Capitalized Failed Anti-Crime Strategy.”

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ Ibid.

cartels. Mostly, this discussion stimulates not only the political and security instability but also radical social changes via the criminal insurgency or criminal actions of these groups.⁹⁴ The social and cultural context at issue here alludes to the narco-cultura in a more particular sense, that is, as Guillermo Prieto indicates, symbols, rituals, artifacts, religious cults, and music allow people to get involved in the narco-cultura as part of their social identity, thus passively absorbing the views and preoccupations of the narco-world, whether consciously or not.⁹⁵

Mexican history is replete with populist characters like Pancho Villa, a bandit and revolutionary. Mexicans tend to attach to iconic figures, which ostensibly protect them from their enemy, as in many cases from the government. This cultural feature explains why the narratives of La Familia and Los Caballeros Templarios were apt to win the hearts of the people—they presented the cartels as romantic social bandits or local champions.⁹⁶ By gaining the imaginative sympathy of the people, these groups undercut the government and took root in the cultural soil.

B. LA FAMILIA MICHOACÁNA AND LOS CABALLEROS TEMPLARIOS AS RELIGIOUS CULTS

1. La Familia’s Quasi-Religious Cult and its Religious Justification

The uniqueness of La Familia stemmed from its cult-like identity and invocation of divine justice, a dimension that made this cartel more than just a criminal organization, but a pseudo-religious cartel. La Familia used discursive strategies, narco-mantas, stories and songs, to transmit its religious ideology, spreading ideological messages through an evangelical approach similar to Christian preaching, but with an inverted message—inspiring its members, for example, to kill police officers, those who have done wrong, and profit from drug trafficking. Cartel members, once indoctrinated in a pseudo-

⁹⁴ John P. Sullivan, “Criminal Insurgency: Narcocultura, Social Banditry, and Information Operations,” *Small Wars Journal*, 2012, <http://smallwarsjournal.com/jrnl/art/criminal-insurgency-narcoculturasocial-banditry-and-information-operationsp>.

⁹⁵ Alma GuillermoPrieto, “The Narco-virus,” *Berkeley Review of Latin American Studies*, 2009, <http://clasarchive.berkeley.edu/Publications/Review/Spring2009/pdf/BRLAS-Spring2009-Guillermoprieto.pdf>, 2–9.

⁹⁶ Sullivan and Logan, “Mexico’s Divine Justice.”

Christian cult, become fervent followers of their cult-like traditions and swear to live and die for it. Advancement in the cartel was dependent to regular prayer meetings attendance, an indoctrination of that of Christians. La Familia accentuates religion and family values to its members. Religious language inscribed in their own “bible” includes reference to the marijuana and cocaine market as a “gift from heaven,” spread through preaching, bible giving, and the decapitation of enemies to achieve divine justice. The inclusion of pseudo-Christian elements within their organizational culture encouraged the emergence of a collective identity with which all Christian individuals (e.g., Catholics, Protestants, etc.) might identify with; however, it is a deceiving philosophy founded on lies and a distorted application of Christianity.

La Familia gained adherents by weaving Christian beliefs into their belief system, which resulted in substantial social support and legitimation. The Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) notes that Mexico has a religious affiliation of about “82.7% Roman Catholic, 1.6% Pentecostal, 1.4% Jehovah’s Witnesses, 5% other Evangelical churches, 1.9% other, 4.7% none, and 2.7% unspecified.”⁹⁷ The cartel exploited the predominant religion in Mexico, Christianity, to woo converts to their ranks. The adoption of pseudo-Christian beliefs legitimized their actions by lending an air of authority and piety to their message. Grillo notes that the cartel’s religious leader, El Más Loco, wrote its own “bible” and that a seized copy reveals precepts combining Christian belief with a self-justifying will to power.⁹⁸

La Familia is best described as a quasi-religious cult, a cartel that sought to normalize its violence under the color of a religious mission. Humberto Padgett sees divine justice, as set forth in the code of conduct, as something more than just an extravagant claim—it is a symbol and used for carte blanche for barbarism. The signature of La Familia—“This is divine justice”⁹⁹—was often found with the bodies or

⁹⁷ “The World Factbook,” Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), accessed 14 December 2015, <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/fields/2122.html>.

⁹⁸ Ioan Grillo, “Mexico Drug Cartel with Its Own ‘Bible.’” *Telegraph*, 24 July 2009, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/centralamericaandthecaribbean/mexico/5900976/Mexico-drug-cartel-with-its-own-bible.html>.

⁹⁹ Humberto Padgett, “Nazario, El Apóstol del Narco [Nazario, The Apostle of the Narco],” *Emeequia Sociedad* no. 278, <http://www.m-x.com.mx/2012-04-15/nazario-el-apostol-del-narco-2/>, 36.

disembodied heads of victims. Tuckman notes that Nazario's men gained worldwide media attention on 6 September 2006, when La Familia assaulted the *Sol y Sombra* disco in Uruapan, Mexico, and pronounced itself a major drug-trafficking player in Mexico. As a symbol of legitimacy, a group of cartel members walked onto the white, shiny dance floor, dumped the contents of a bag—five heads—as a signature ritual, and gave warning: “La Familia does not kill for pay, does not kill women, does not kill innocents, but kills those who deserve to die. Everyone must know: this is divine justice.”¹⁰⁰ Grayson notes that the five decapitated men were allegedly involved in the rape and murder of a waitress, and it was but a few days later that La Familia exercised its “right” to enact divine justice.¹⁰¹ Robinson notes that these barbaric, cult-like practices were borrowed from ancient Aztec religion.¹⁰² Such barbarism, funded with capital accumulated from drug trafficking to the United States, permitted La Familia to establish areas of control in Michoacán and neighboring states. Thus, their powerful violence, entwined with religious practices, nurtured their legitimacy in the state of Michoacán. As Grayson puts it,

This means that parallel to the elected government stands a narco-administration that generates employment, keeps order (repressing rival cartels), performs civic functions (repairing churches), collects taxes (extorting businessmen), and screens newcomers to the municipality (employing lookouts).¹⁰³

The constitution of Mexico prevents elected government officials from serving more than a single term in office; Grayson argues that this constitutional mandate does not apply to narco-leaders, “although bullets from opponents rather than ballots may abbreviate their terms.”¹⁰⁴

La Familia was known not just for its atrocities and beheadings but also for its demands that members follow a radical Christian cult of their own definition. “La Familia would promote themselves as soldiers of God who were carrying out divine appointments

¹⁰⁰ Jo Tuckman, “Mexico Democracy Interrupted,” New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 45.

¹⁰¹ George W. Grayson, “La Familia Drug Cartel,” viii

¹⁰² Jeremy Robinson, *Cannibal (A Jack Sigler Thriller)* (Breakneck Media, 2015), 19.

¹⁰³ Grayson, “La Familia Drug Cartel,” ix.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

of violence as form of legitimation.”¹⁰⁵ As part of their religious practices and indoctrination, were La Familia recruits were steeped in the group’s manifesto or bible, which urged the faithful to seek God for strength, wisdom, prosperity, courage, and conformity to what they have received—values that are not offensive *per se*. These teachings were propelled by the doctrine of a Christian writer, John Eldredge. These qualities are admired in Eldredge’s book, which affirms the ideals of reintegration, empowerment, and self-renewal.¹⁰⁶ La Familia emphasized religion and family values during recruitment and was known to place banners in its areas of operation declaring that substance abuse and exploitation of women and children were unacceptable. In addition, La Familia discouraged the use of witchcraft or narco-saint worship, as they only venerated God and depended on His protection alone.

According to Logan and Sullivan, La Familia based its ideology on its interpretation of *Wild at Heart*, by Christian writer John Eldredge.¹⁰⁷ Eldredge asserts, “Deep in his heart, every man longs for a battle to fight, an adventure to live, and a beauty to rescue.”¹⁰⁸ In an interview with the *Colorado Springs Gazette*, Eldredge said, “People have used the Bible to justify a lot of evil actions, and it brings me sorrow and anger to know they (La Familia) are doing this, and I renounce their use of my words in this way.”¹⁰⁹ Nevertheless, La Familia used Eldredge’s message as a motivational tool to make the cartel stronger, gain the social support of Michoacán, and legitimize their cause. *Wild at Heart* is a self-help book for Christian men that asserts that modern society has weakened men, resulting in the loss of their core identities. The book aims to help men revive their God-given masculine heart, which can be wild, adventurous, and at times even violent. He encourages men to emulate the masculinity of Jesus Christ and the male identity in the sovereignty of God. For instance, Eldredge makes reference to the

¹⁰⁵ Kail, *Narco-Cults*, 237.

¹⁰⁶ John Eldredge, *Wild at Heart* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2001), chapter 3.

¹⁰⁷ Sullivan and Logan, “Mexico’s Divine Justice.”

¹⁰⁸ Eldredge, *Wild at Heart*, chapter 3.

¹⁰⁹ ChristianityToday, “Eldredge Denounces Drug Cartel,” 29 June 2010, <http://www.christianitytoday.com/gleanings/2010/june/eldredge-denounces-drug-cartel.html>.

forceful behavior of Christ in the temple and King David's massacre of the Philistines as a result of their not being on the right side of the Lord's mercy.¹¹⁰

Eldredge observes that Christ encouraged His devotees to accept punishment silently by turning the other cheek.¹¹¹ Yet He also showed wrath at the moneychangers' using the temple as a marketplace by flipping their tables and driving them out with a scourge he had braided.¹¹² In other occasion, Eldredge notes, Jesus cursed a tree that bore no fruit. Eldredge refers to Jesus Christ not as a "nice guy" but as a warrior who pursued justice to defend his Father's will and honor—a message that fell into self-serving hands and was abused by El Más Loco.¹¹³ Starting from the premise that fallen individuals are not free to take justice and revenge upon themselves, Eldredge concludes that La Familia hijacked the gospel narrative of justice and redemption for false application to the political situation in Mexico. Sadly, Eldredge's teaching (a broad, rigorous, more systemized study) nonetheless served La Familia as a foundation for its cult-like practices.

Another La Familia practice with quasi-religious overtones was strict abstinence from alcohol and drugs as a symbol of purity. Many members were recruited from drug-rehabilitation clinics and helped towards recovery and a new life among the ranks of La Familia. Respect for women and children was inculcated through an eight-week training that included intensive educational programs that La Familia asserted to be life changing. Once indoctrinated, members observed prayer time every day before carrying out their duties as protectors of their people and enactors of divine justice.¹¹⁴ Grayson notes, "The leaders of La Familia assured those who successfully complete this exercise that they are prepared to do the Lord's work—that is, safeguarding women, combating competing

¹¹⁰ Eldredge, *Wild at Heart*, 214–38

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, 81.

¹¹² John Eldredge, *The Way of the Wild Heart Manual: A Personal Map for Your Masculine Journey*, (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2006), 81.

¹¹³ Eldredge, *Wild at Heart*, 140–42.

¹¹⁴ Tim Padgett, "Mexico's Meth Warriors." *Time Magazine*, 28 June 2010, <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,1997449,00.html>.

cartels, and preventing the local sale of drugs.”¹¹⁵ Simply put, La Familia used religious and pietistic virtues to legitimize their actions in the eyes of the community by implying benevolence towards Michoacán and a praiseworthy willingness to protect and serve, replacing the ineffective government with effective and divinely sanctioned rule.¹¹⁶ Logan and Sullivan note, “By embracing the ethos, language, and imagery of a religious, divinely sanctioned group, they ensure group cohesion and cultural autonomy and reinforce political and social control.”¹¹⁷ Astorga writes that “La Familia believed too much in its own myth” and states that La Familia believed it could replace the Mexican government in Michoacán.¹¹⁸

La Familia and Los Caballeros Templarios were the only drug cartels that combined Christian virtues with extreme violence as part of their “social cleansing.” They even had their own bible, known as *Los Pensamientos de La Familia*, which captures the ideals of the cartel. *Los Pensamientos* reveals a great deal of disunity, because it had a mortal author, El Más Loco. The book opens with a modified version of a common reflection in Spanish:

Le pedí a Dios fuerzas y me dio dificultades para hacerme fuerte,
Pedí sabiduría, y me dio problemas para resolver,
Pedí prosperidad y me dio cerebro y músculos para trabajar,
Pedí valor y me dio obstáculos que superar,
Yo no recibí nada de lo que pedí pero he recibido todo lo que necesitaba.¹¹⁹

¹¹⁵ Grayson, “La Familia Drug Cartel,” vii.

¹¹⁶ Logan and Sullivan, *Mexico’s ‘Divine Justice.’*

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

¹¹⁸ Tim Padgett, “Mexico’s Fearsome La Familia: Eerily Quiet,” *Time*, 31 January 2011, <http://content.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,2044696,00.html>.

¹¹⁹ Francisco Gomez, “El Evangelio de la ‘Familia’ [The Gospel of the Family],” *El Universal*, 23 April 2009, <http://archivo.eluniversal.com.mx/graficos/pdf09/lafamilia.pdf>.

Translation:

I asked God for strength and he gave me difficulties to make me strong,
I asked for wisdom, and he gave me problems to resolve,
I asked for prosperity and gave me a brain and muscles to work,
I asked for courage and gave me obstacles to overcome,
I received nothing of what I asked for, but I received everything I needed.

Los Pensamientos governed the actions of those who entered the ranks of these criminal gangs. Its passages are elements of indoctrination. According to the Intelligence Attorney General's Office of Mexico, which *El Universal* had access to, the book contains the religious foundations under which its leaders operated—it is the guide that inspired all La Familia members.¹²⁰ At times contradictory or epigrammatic, *Los Pensamientos* is a collection of passages that address multiple facets of life: how a man should behave when faced with daily challenges, how to be a better person every day, how to act with humility, gentleness, love and kindness, how to deal with success, pain, life in society, and death. It has passages such as, “The strength of man lies in the domain of his mind and his greatness is known for the spirit of his humility and honesty of his soul, and his will to defeat XXX Special Forces.”¹²¹ Inspired by religious fervor, La Familia considered itself an organization that protected society—but through violent crimes.

2. Los Caballeros Templarios' Code of Conduct

Los Caballeros Templarios published a booklet describing its code of conduct and describing the ethics that governed their organization. Federal authorities in Mexico discovered the booklet, “*Código De Los Caballeros Templarios De Michoacán*” (“Code of the Knights Templar of Michoacán”) during an arrest.¹²² The 24-page booklet challenges adherents to protect the principles that sustain their social order, based on values that will last through generations. The code refers to biblical texts and contains 53

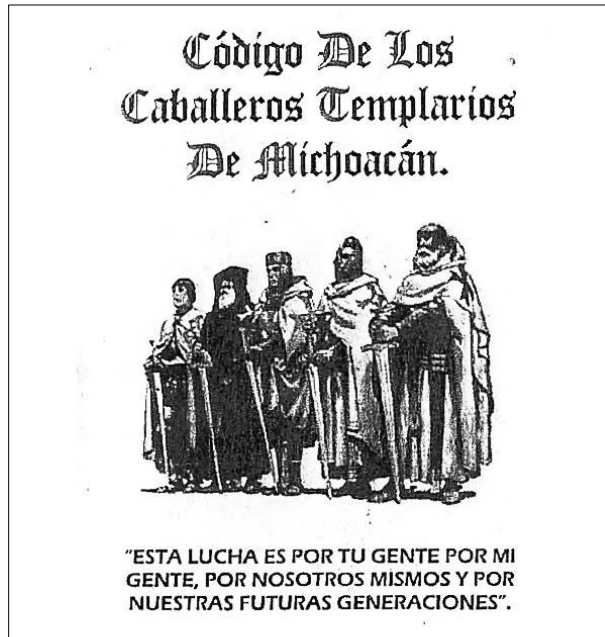
¹²⁰ Gomez, “Gospel of the Family.”

¹²¹ Ibid.

¹²² Kail, *Narco-Cults*, 248.

items. The subtitle (see Figure 2) reads, “Esta lucha es por tu gente por mi gente, por nosotros mismos y por nuestras futuras generaciones” (“This fight is for your people, for my people, for ourselves, and for future generations”).¹²³

Figure 2. Los Caballeros’ Code of Conduct: Cover Page



Source: “Codigo De Los Caballeros Templarios De Michoacan,” Los Caballeros Templarios, cover page, <http://www.tribalanalysiscenter.com/PDF-TAC/Codigo%20De%20Los%20Caballeros%20Templarios%20De%20Michoacan>.

The code warns that no one who joins the group, having been elected by a council composed of the brothers with more experience and good judgment, will abandon the cause. According to the booklet, anyone joining the group must make an oath that the code should be respected at the expense of life itself.¹²⁴ Padgett describes the code of conduct as richly illustrated with images of medieval knights with a red cross on their chests and including an initiation oath (Figure 3) that says:

¹²³ “Codigo De Los Caballeros Templarios De Michoacan [Code of the Kinights Templar of Michoacan],” Los Caballeros Templarios, <http://www.tribalanalysiscenter.com/PDF-TAC/Codigo%20De%20Los%20Caballeros%20Templarios%20De%20Michoacan>, cover page.

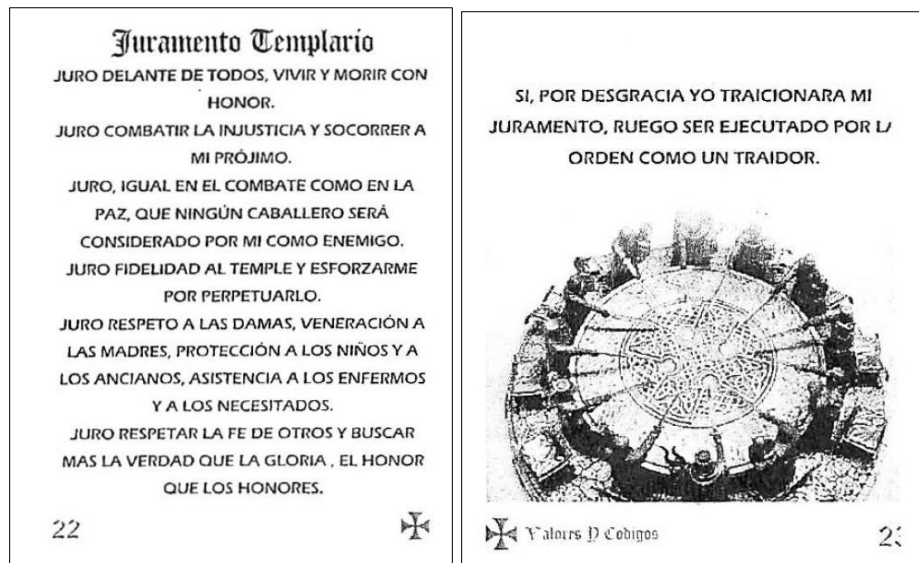
¹²⁴ Padgett, “Nazario, The Apostle of the Narco,” 45-46.

Juro delante de todos, vivir y morir con honor. Juro combatir la in justicia y socorrer a mi prójimo. Juro, igual en el combate como en la paz, que ningún caballero será considerado por mí como enemigo. Juro fidelidad al temple y esforzarme por perpetuarlo. Juro respeto a los demás, veneración a las madres, protección a los niños o los ancianos, asistencia a los enfermos y a los necesitados. Juro respetar la fe de otros y buscar más la verdad que la gloria, el honor que los honores. Si por desgracia yo traicionara mi juramento, ruego ser ejecutado por la orden como un traidor.¹²⁵

Translation:

I swear before all, to live and die with honor. I swear to fight injustice and assist my neighbor. I swear, as in combat and in peace, that no gentleman will be considered by me as an enemy. I swear allegiance to the temple and will strive to perpetuate it. I swear respect for others, reverence for mothers, protection for children and the elderly, caring for the sick and the needy. I swear to respect the faith of others and seek truth more than glory, honor more than honors. If by disgrace I betray my oath, I beg to be executed by the order as a traitor.

Figure 3. Los Caballeros Templarios Oath



Source: “Codigo De Los Caballeros Templarios De Michoacan,” Los Caballeros Templarios, 22–23, <http://www.tribalanalysiscenter.com/PDF-TAC/Codigo%20De%20Los%20Caballeros%20Templarios%20De%20Michoacan>.

¹²⁵ Padgett, “Nazario, The Apostle of the Narco,” 43.

The code recognizes the right of peoples and nations to govern themselves “within their natural economic environment” and argues for the “support for freedom of expression, conscience, and religion,” including diverse belief, because “the Templar should try to understand how others are close to God.”¹²⁶ A fundamental rule for Los Caballeros is to respect the vow of silence, and if this is broken, or an offense committed against any member of the council, “the death penalty is applied.” The code insists on an “immaculate” conduct of its members, which includes “not be brutal, not drunk, not to abuse the innocence of chaste women and children, or use deception or power to seduce.”

3. Los Caballeros Templarios: Narco-Apóstol (Apostle)

Padgett notes that the contemporary reality of Mexico produced a man about whom very little is known.¹²⁷ His name was Nazario Moreno González, a self-proclaimed apostle and author of a work with ethical, philosophical, and religious pretensions. The nature of this man was complex. He was the head of a drug cartel and an “apostle;” cruel, with merciful kindness; a preacher and a born murderer; messianic and pragmatic at the same time.¹²⁸ A founder of La Familia and key inspiration for Los Caballeros Templarios, he was killed in December 2010 by federal forces. His legacy is a booklet with messianic scriptures in which he rejoices in talking about humility, courage, honesty, love for God, generosity, patience and other humane qualities, signed by his own hand, *El Más Loco*.¹²⁹ Padgett reveals the acrostic of “El Más Loco” as:

Es una verdadera fuente de sabiduría
La obra que ahora nos presenta el autor

Motiva, ilustra, enseña y proporciona
Ánimo y empuje hacia la superación
Siendo ‘El Más Loco’ un verdadero mentor

¹²⁶ Padgett, “Nazario, The Apostle of the Narco,” 5.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, 36.

¹²⁸ Padgett, “Nazario, The Apostle of the Narco,” 36.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*

Loco, para nada ciertamente no lo es,
Objetable en lo absoluto esa denominación.
Cuerdo, sabio e inteligente, en cambio,
Opino merece esta obra honorífica mención.¹³⁰

Translation:

It is a true source of wisdom,
The work that the author now presents

Motivates, illustrates, teaches and provides
Courage and push towards overcoming
Being 'El Más Loco' a true mentor

Crazy, certainly, is not
Objectionable at all, this term.
Sane, wise, and understanding; however,
I think this work deserves honorable mention.

Humberto Padgett describes the chain of command of Los Caballeros as a four-level hierarchy. In the first level are the “*apóstoles*” (apostles); the second layer is the “*predicadores*” (preachers) who are responsible for regions, places, or areas. The third layer is the “*administradores*” (administrators) who serve as accountants, paying public civil servants, members of the organization, and legal advisors and managing the productive sectors and controlled municipalities. At bottom are the “*guerreros celestiales*” (heavenly warriors), the fierce face of the organization: hit men, police officers, and drug addicts who were rehabilitated and recruited by the cartel.¹³¹ In an interview with the McClatchy Newspaper, Grayson said, “They bring in motivational

¹³⁰ Padgett, “Nazario, The Apostle of the Narco,” 39.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*, 46.

speakers to their indoctrination sessions. Again, it's the U.S. Army be-all-you-can-be; you can take your life in your own hands 'you can chart your future.'¹³²

After drug rehabilitation, the guerreros were evaluated according to their ability to integrate. Once selected, they underwent motivational therapies and evangelical Christian indoctrination, then were taken to the Michoacán mountains for weapons training. Only afterwards were they initiated by ritual. According to Padgett, the system of punishment in Los Caballeros Templarios consisted of three stages or warnings. On the first offense, the penitent was admitted to a rehabilitation center for three days. On the second, the offender was held in a rehabilitation center, in isolation, for twelve days. The culprit was blindfolded, tied up, positioned like Christ on the cross and beaten twelve times with a wooden rod before his peers. The third stage was ritual execution. The member was tried and, if found guilty, given the opportunity to pray for a peaceful rest. The person who invited the member to join executed the offender; otherwise, an apostle executes him.¹³³

C. CONCLUSION

This section presented the religious and historical background of Mexico, the La Familia Michoacán, and Los Caballeros Templarios. It included the Mexican government oppression towards Catholics, which created an anti-government sentiment among the Mexican people, in particular, that of Michoacan. It included the religious practices of these cartels as well of their tactics for indoctrination. It also incorporated the cartels demand for obedience and silence from whom they “protected,” and reviewed how the concept of “us versus them,” which challenged government legitimacy while amassing social validity for themselves. It looked at the economic, social, and cultural contexts of these groups and cited the enforced use of services and protection quotas. Finally, discussion of the Christian cult-like aspects of these groups revealed the uniqueness of them, as found in their narco-cultura, and their motivations for doing what they do.

¹³² “Mexican Cartel Deals Drugs, Violence With Religious Fervor,” *McClatchy Newspaper*, 22 June 2010, <http://www.mcclatchydc.com/news/nation-world/world/article24585997.html>.

¹³³ Padgett, “Nazario, The Apostle of the Narco,” 46.

Despite the “good intentions” in the inception of these two groups, the inability of the Mexican government to provide social services and guarantee safety compelled the vigilantes to rely on narco-trafficking for profit, brutal tactics for sustainment, and an equivocal Christian ideology for creating a compelling cause. As they morphed into drug-trafficking cartels, La Familia and Los Caballeros Templarios used powerful pseudo-religious ideology to conquer the hearts and minds of the Michoacán people, who in turn gave them social support and joined their ranks with the goal of gaining social legitimacy.

Mexico is a complex country, its culture shaped by upheavals, oppression, and reversals. Folk tradition and a passionate, if poorly informed, religious faith has been among the few comforts of the disenfranchised. The people of Michoacana were proud to fight and die for their beliefs against a godless, hostile government in the Cristero War. This posture of moral defiance and a conviction that the humble possess a righteousness and spiritual superiority unaccountable to government law continues today—even though the popular understanding of the Christian faith has become confused and distorted, due largely to the suppression of religious education over several generations. With their pious language, quasi-monastic vows and discipline, and air of peasant nobility and courtly ideals, La Familia Michoacana and Los Caballeros Templarios seemed larger than life, filling a legendary cultural niche and satisfying the hunger for valor, harsh trials, and camaraderie so common among youth who experience hypocrisy and injustice. This carefully conjured aura was able to persist, despite the brutality of the cartels, because a hopeless society, betrayed and abandoned by its government and denied legitimate religion, needed some agency in which to trust. Support for the cartels was often more than merely the fruit of intimidation; their essential goodness and the evil of the government and other rivals became an article of faith—and denying the faith is apostasy.

These deep dynamics still operate in the heart of the people, and any attempt to address Mexico’s difficulties must take them into account. Jobs and education can do much to disarm the appeal of criminal gangs as individuals act in their enlightened self-interest. But a purely secular answer that thwarts and competes against the Church will

not satisfy the romanticism of the Mexican soul, which seeks spiritual food and will act in rugged allegiance to another kingdom.

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III. THE SINALOA CARTEL'S USE OF NARCO-CORRIDOS AND EMBRACE OF JESUS MALVERDE

This chapter presents two cultural developments of critical importance in the rise of the cartels. First, the musical genre of narco-corrido, with its role in defining the narco-cultura and the cultura's reciprocal molding of corrido words and music. Then, it takes the evolution of Jesus Malverde from people's bandit and "angel of the poor" to a powerful narco-saint who casts a deceptive piety on cartel activities, aiding recruitment, legitimation, normalization, and member resolve. The intersection of these cultural forces in the form of corrido-style hymns to Malverde and the difficulty of countering their widespread influence is also discussed.

A. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The origins of the Mexican corrido are uncertain. Contradictions abound in both historical and contemporary literature as to the place, time, and social conditions in which the musical form started. Avatia notes two major theories, one claiming indigenous precedents and the other Spanish.¹³⁴ The first argues that the corrido's origin predates the Spanish conquest; speakers of indigenous languages had an epic form of poetry used for recording day-to-day situations.¹³⁵ Serrano proposes origins in Aztec narrative poetry and folk stories, which chronicled public and private life, ceremonies, and rituals.¹³⁶ By contrast, Mendoza holds that the corridos descended from a Spanish romantic tradition that was imported to Mexico and places the corrido within the Spanish epic-narrative genre, which recounts sentimental events to evoke an emotional response.¹³⁷

Avatia argues a third view, in which the corrido is a genuine national creation, blending elements from the Spanish and indigenous traditions to create something

¹³⁴ Avatia Hernández, *Corrido Histórico Mexicano: Voy A Cantarles La Historia* [*Historical Mexican Corrido: I Will Sing the Story*], (Mexico City, Mexico: Editorial Porrúa, 1998), 12.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*, 15.

¹³⁶ Celedonio Serrano Martínez, *El Corrido Mexicano no Deriva del Romance Español* [*The Mexican Corrido not Drift Spanish Romance*], (Mexico: Cento Cultural Guerrence, 1963), 10–15.

¹³⁷ Vicente T. Mendoza, *El Romance Español y El Corrido Mexicano, México* [*The Spanish Romance and the Mexican Corrido, Mexico*], (Universidad Nacional Autónoma, 1997), 3–5.

distinctive. It is generally accepted that the evolution of the corrido accelerated after the independence of Mexico and not because of indigenous or Spanish influences, but from a multicultural population that shared common values, who in turn, made their musical compositions in the form of storytelling.¹³⁸ On the other hand, Mendoza argues that the structure of the art form was increasingly formalized by songwriters on the border between Texas and northeastern Mexico after the 1850s. He sees the corrido as a genre that fosters reflection on the listener's way of life and transmits stories of valor—as opposed to the themes found in Spanish and indigenous songs—and advocates a regionalist view, in which the corridos sprang up along the border.¹³⁹

Mendoza maintains that between 1800 and 1850 there were many compositions circulating in Sinaloa that lacked the narrative or epic characteristics of the corrido, and asserts that the corrido was created during the Mexican Revolution.¹⁴⁰ Three different accounts are offered by Avatia as to when this musical expression began, whether between the Mexican independence of 1821 and the rise of Porfirio Diaz 1876; from the beginning of the Diaz dictatorship until the revolution of 1910–1920; or from the first years of the revolution to today.¹⁴¹ There is a tendency to disqualify the post-revolutionary period as too late for the birth of the corridos. Mendoza pinpoints the first stage of corrido development as occurring in the latter part of the 19th century, when songs were first sung glorifying the rebellion against Porfirio Diaz, emphasizing the courage of the heroes and their contempt for life.¹⁴² Paredes points out that people wrote ballads glamorizing the bandits as well, turning them into living legends and popular heroes. Thus, the Mexican Revolution appears to be the most important and transitional period in the making of corridos.¹⁴³

¹³⁸ Avatia, *Historical Mexican Corrido*, 18.

¹³⁹ Mendoza, *The Spanish Romance and the Mexican Corrido*, 7–20.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 66–68.

¹⁴¹ Avatia, *Historical Mexican Corrido*, 32.

¹⁴² Mendoza, *The Spanish Romance and the Mexican Corrido*, 26.

¹⁴³ Américo Paredes, *With His Pistol in His Hand: A Border Ballad and Its Hero*, (Austin, TX: Texas University Press, 2010), 66.

1. Post-Revolution Corridos and Drug-trafficking Origins

The phenomenon of drug trafficking in Mexico stems from the 1920s, in a Mexico plagued with revolutionary uprisings, economic crises, poor living conditions, and migration towards a better life. This era also saw citizen persecutions and powerful ambitions among national leaders. Drug trafficking began with the Chinese influx of the early 1920s, they brought opium and cultivation techniques while escaping the harsh segregation and exploitation they had suffered in the United States. Settling throughout Mexico, the Chinese became an important labor force.¹⁴⁴ From 1919–1930, anti-Chinese campaigns started in Mexico, with brutal events that led to repudiation, persecution, arrest, imprisonment, murder, and exile—a story recounted in the corrido, “*El Destierro de los Chinos*.”¹⁴⁵

Many Chinese migrated to the mountains of Sinaloa, favoring Culiacán as an ideal hideaway. As their opium-growing techniques and processing for commercial production improved, the Chinese were able to count on its cultivation as a marginal economic activity that allowed them to survive.¹⁴⁶ As opium production prospered, addiction increased. Astorga notes that in 1909, the first focused meeting was held in Shanghai to propose the control of opium and its derivatives. During the 1912 International Opium Convention at The Hague, Mexico approved and ratified a proposed drug-control treaty. In 1922, national authorities ordered Sinaloa’s governor to destroy all opium plantations and employ a *mano dura* (harsh hand) against criminals. In 1925, the legal grounds for import of opium, morphine, and cocaine were established, subject to permission from the Mexican department of public health. At the same time, the Geneva accords established a legal framework for opium cultivation, as well as the use prohibition of opium, marijuana, and cocaine.¹⁴⁷

¹⁴⁴ Luis Astorga, *El Siglo de las Drogas: El Narcotráfico, del Porfiriato Al Nuevo Milenio [The Century of Drugs: Drug Trafficking, From the Porfiriato to the New Millennium]*, (University of Michigan, MI: Plaza y Janés, 2005), 28.

¹⁴⁵ Avatia, *Historical Mexican Corrido*, 200–1.

¹⁴⁶ Astorga, *The Century of Drugs*, 30.

¹⁴⁷ Astorga, *The Century of Drugs*, 31.

In 1919, the United States enacted the Volstead Act, which prohibited the sale, import, and manufacture of alcohol throughout America. The act, also called the “dry law,” lasted until 1933 and resulted in the illegal importation of alcohol from Canada and Mexico.¹⁴⁸ During this period, casinos thrived along the Mexican border, with a market in illegal alcohol and opium that was controlled by the oligarchy.¹⁴⁹ Corridos started to appear, telling stories of smuggling—in particular, of tequila—to the United States. The *tequileros* operated as bootleggers (carrying contraband in their boots) or horse-backers (transporting alcohol by horse or mule).¹⁵⁰ Ramírez-Pimienta lists titles of corridos produced during this time, such as “*Los Tequileros*,” “*El Contrabando de El Paso*,” “*El Corrido de los Bootleggers*,” “*El Contrabando de San Antonio*” and “*Nuevo Contrabando de San Antonio*,” claiming these titles are important in following the lineage of compositions about drug trafficking.¹⁵¹ Border conflicts began to be reflected in corrido lyrics, exposing the socioeconomic condition and poverty in the region and justifying unlawful acts as a legitimate way to overcome poverty, while providing a negative image to U.S. authorities.¹⁵² During the 1920s, the northern musical genre known as the *ranchera* song took strength, becoming a city-dweller product. Meanwhile in Sinaloa, the use of *la tambora* (the drum) was featured in a regional style known as “Sinaloa band.” Music provided a recreational element, whether in the city or villages: people felt a fervent admiration for the music, and fiestas broke the monotony of everyday life. For the players, music was a way to earn additional income.¹⁵³

¹⁴⁸ Juan Ramírez-Pimienta, *Cantar a los narcos. Voces y Versos del Narcocorrido* [*Singing to the Narcos. Voices and Verses of the Narcocorrido*], (Federal District, Mexico: Temas De Hoy, 2011), 20.

¹⁴⁹ Francisco Ruiz, *El Cartel de Juárez* (Temas de Hoy, 2008), 58.

¹⁵⁰ Ramírez-Pimienta, *Singing to the Narcos*, 23.

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 30–35.

¹⁵² Ragland, *Nothern Music*, 34.

¹⁵³ Helena Simonett, *En Sinaloa Nací: Historia De La Música De Banda*, (Sinaloa, Mexico: Asociación de Gestores del Patrimonio Histórico y Cultural de Mazatlán, 2004), 147.

2. The 1930s: Corridos and Drug Contraband

In the 1930s, drug traffickers became part of the social structure of Mexico. Opium became illegal and lucrative contraband.¹⁵⁴ The border between Mexico and the United States was the common ground for transactions. The smugglers were described as adventurous men—fence jumpers, seduced by money; lawbreakers who scoffed at government forces.¹⁵⁵ Mexico was considered the core distribution center for narcotics, with Ciudad Juarez the most dangerous area of operation.¹⁵⁶ In 1931, crimes of drug trafficking and addiction came under federal jurisdiction, forcing an increase on surveillance at ports, customs, and borders. These control measures, and the difficulty of countering them, increased the value of narcotics, resulting in higher profits for drug traffickers. The laws were ineffective because the drug traffickers were linked to corrupt politicians who participated in organized crime.¹⁵⁷

Astorga notes that Americans were the main drug users and that the U.S. government assumed that illegal immigrants were the ones who increased consumption and smuggling. The United States accused Mexico of trying to weaken the “moral quality” and destroy the social fabric of the United States by putting heroin and marijuana into the hands of Americans.¹⁵⁸ On the repeal of the Volstead Act in 1933, drug smuggling became the primary illegal trade and cocaine started to be the principal subject of the corridos. Ramírez-Pimienta notes that most of the corridos of the 1930s contain a narrative based on real facts pertaining to the evolution of drug smuggling. In 1934, for instance, corridos such as “*Por Morfina y Cocaína*” and “*El Contrabandista*” referred to the profitable benefits of drug trafficking, which is a subject common in current narco-corridos.¹⁵⁹ In the lyrics of the time, corruption, impunity, and incompetent government are frequently heard and the drug trafficker is glorified as a “generous bandit” who

¹⁵⁴ Astorga, *The Century of Drugs*, 37.

¹⁵⁵ Valenzuela Arce, *Boss of Bosses*, 120.

¹⁵⁶ Astorga, *The Century of Drugs*, 39.

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 41.

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 57.

¹⁵⁹ Ramírez-Pimienta, *Singing to the Narcos*, 88.

performs community work and gains the appreciation of the people he protects.¹⁶⁰ Montoya points out that during the 1930s, corridos were popular on both sides of the border, in saloons, parties, and bars.¹⁶¹

3. The 1940s: Drug-trafficking Evolution and the Popularity of Música Norteña

The 1940s were crucial in the history of large-scale drug production in Mexico. In Sinaloa, drug production was intense and incremented to produce more heroin and morphine during World War II.¹⁶² According to Montoya and Fernandez, the United States lessened drug restrictions in the 1940s, giving a boost to industrial poppy cultivation in the mountains of Sinaloa. Initially, the drug demand increased due to the large number of addicts in the United States, making Mexico the leading supplier of drugs to Americans.¹⁶³ Drug trafficking became a solid organized-crime activity among Mexican politicians and elites and drug trafficking was considered a lucrative activity that gave people power and status.

Sinaloa became an epicenter of drug production and distribution due to its geography and climate, which are suitable for poppies and marijuana, and its proximity to the border, which kept transportation costs low.¹⁶⁴ For the Sinaloan, poppy cultivation meant a chance of employment and prosperity, and, for many, a family business. Though drug trafficking was illegal, it was legitimate from the Sinaloan perspective in that it offered development opportunities and a way out of poverty. Astorga mentions that those who engaged in poppy cultivation and the trafficking of opium were known as *gomeros* (gums), due to the texture of the heroin.¹⁶⁵

¹⁶⁰ Ragland, *Nothern Music*, 48.

¹⁶¹ Luis Montoya, "El Narcocorrido en Culiacán [The Narcocorrido in Culiacan]," LETRALIA: Tierra de Letras, 4 May 2009, <http://letralia.com/209/ensayo05.htm>.

¹⁶² Rober N. Córdova Solís, "Narcocultura" en Sinaloa: Simbología, Transgresión y Medios de Comunicación [Narcoculture in Sinaloa: Symbology, Transgression and Media]" (Doctoral Dissertation, Universidad Autónoma de Mexico, 2010).

¹⁶³ Luis Montoya and Juan Fernández, "El Narcocorrido en México [The Narcocorrido in Mexico]," *Revista Cultura y Droga* 14, no. 16 (2009), 217.

¹⁶⁴ Astorga, *The Century of Drugs*, 62.

¹⁶⁵ Astorga, *The Century of Drugs*, 63.

On the cultural side in the 1940s, northern music became a powerful symbol of the Mexican working class. As indicated by Ragland, border conflicts and migration flow were key elements in the popularity of *la música norteña*.¹⁶⁶ During this period, peasants and Mexican workers moved to the United States in search of economic improvement, offering cheap labor in farming and construction. This period was portrayed in the corridos through snapshots of everyday life, experiences, religious beliefs, and overall migrant attitude. The ballads stressed workers' rights, abuses, discrimination, and conflicts with the law, perpetuating the notion of *mexicanidad*, or solidarity within the immigrant community. On both sides of the border, distinctive symbols of the working class were added to the bands: the accordion and the *sexto* bass, instruments associated with marginal groups.¹⁶⁷ Themes pertaining to drug production and distribution increased with corridos such as "*La Carga Blanca*," referring to the white cargo, cocaine.¹⁶⁸

4. The 1950s–60s: Corrido Deterioration and Drug-smuggling Fight

During the 1950–60s, the musical traditions of Mexico had a setback; however, according to Valenzuela, the rock-and-roll boom in the United States played an important role on the relapse of the corridos as Mexicans were influenced by this genre.¹⁶⁹ Mexico enjoyed a sharp decline in illiteracy, accompanied by urbanization, in which the population was forced to leave the rural areas and adopt an urban lifestyle. The youth identified with rock and roll and gradually distanced themselves from the corridos, but the genre did not disappear altogether.¹⁷⁰ The scarcity of narco-corridos was accompanied by a period of relative social and economic stability in the 1960s. According to Ragland, the 1960s were a period in which northern music had a significant effect in the border region, because it remained associated with the immigrant working

¹⁶⁶ Ragland, *Nothern Music*, 64.

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 53.

¹⁶⁸ Juan Ramirez-Pimienta, "Los Corridos de Juan Meneses: Dos Antecedentes Tempranos del Corrido en la Frontera Mexico-Estados Unidos [Corridos of John Meneses: Two Early Background of Corrido in the Border of Mexico-United States]," *Aztlan: A Journal of Chicano Studies*, 35 no. 2 (2010), 97.

¹⁶⁹ Valenzuela Arce, *Boss of Bosses*, 119.

¹⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

class in the United States.¹⁷¹ Corridos played an important role in strengthening immigrant society, with the songs serving as a venue for protest during the Chicano Movement of the late 1960s, which aimed at Mexican–American empowerment. Thus, though the genre continued, its themes centered around the border conflict.

An economic crisis afflicted the farming communities of Mexico, particularly Sinaloa, where living conditions in rural communities were poor, and this precipitated a migration from rural areas to Culiacan, the state’s capital.¹⁷² This period saw unemployment, homelessness, and a failure of government social services, and drug trafficking became an opportunity to improve living conditions. For Sinaloans, drug trafficking remained a part of local experience, and music served to channel the drug culture to nonparticipants. People who came from the countryside brought their customs, religion, and musical preferences, including a taste for the corridos of the north. Broadcast over the radio, northern music began to be heard in streets, bars, restaurants, markets, and festivals. At the time, this music was associated with a rural culture; however, according to Sanchez, the popularity of northern music in Sinaloa underwent two stages. The first was in the 1950s and 1960s, when the Sinaloans emerged on the music scene. The second came in the 1960s, where the entertainment industry propelled the style to a regional level.¹⁷³ Conditions were ideal for the drug traffickers to strengthen their image and reach prominence through their songs. Drug traffickers had been associated with rural stereotypes of Sinaloa, but a new image began to emerge. It was a turning point when the narco moved from the rural countryside and mountains to the city, his music filling the streets and urban spaces.

¹⁷¹ Ragland, *Musica Nortena*, 64.

¹⁷² Mario Sánchez Aguirre, “Una Mirada Historica al Narcocorrido en Sinaloa: Apologia Censura y Tragedia Social [A Historical Look at Narcocorrido in Sinaloa: Apology Censorship and Social Tragedy],” (master’s thesis, Universidad Autonoma de Sinaloa, Culiacán, Sinaloa 2003).

¹⁷³ Sánchez Aguirre, “Una Mirada Historica al Narcocorrido en Sinaloa.”

5. Narco-Corridos and the Birth of the Narco-Cultura

During the 1970s, drug trafficking became an overwhelming scourge; it was then the narco-corridos boomed.¹⁷⁴ Though their origins were in the 1930s smuggling songs, they were fully up to date with the times, relaying stories of trafficking, violence, and border conflicts as well. From this point, corridos began to be associated with the narco-cultura.¹⁷⁵ Their composition, performance, and mass distribution shared in the violence that existed in the state of Sinaloa—which was perhaps the reason of their success. Hundreds of rural families fled the hostile environment created by the Mexican government, and as they arrived in Culiacan, they found unemployment, violence, and drug addiction. New scenarios were created in the city as urbanites integrated, interacted, and coexisted with *campesinos* from the countryside. To exacerbate the problem, smugglers set up in different areas in Mexico, in particular Culiacan, Sinaloa, spreading the narco-cultura.¹⁷⁶ This decade was highlighted by many narco-corrido hits that recounted the military violence and repression of a corrupt, intolerant, and inept government. Ramírez-Pimienta notes that *Los Tigres del Norte* for the first time appeared as a narco-corrido band, with instant musical hits such as “*La Banda del Carro Rojo*” and “*La Van Gris*,” which referred to drug smuggling and migrant stories. Narco-corridos were listened by all social classes in diverse settings.¹⁷⁷ Avatia notes that the corrido sound and rhythm changed during this period and the lyrics had fewer historical topics, but the general content and distinctive style remained.¹⁷⁸ In the 1970s, as Ramirez-Pimienta notes, the narco-cultura started to be visible in Sinaloan society. Certain behavioral patterns driven by a desire for power, pleasure-seeking, and social prestige became manifested in the larger culture; religiously, devotion to Jesús Malverde, a type

¹⁷⁴ Luis Astorga, “La Cocaína en EL Corrido [The Cocaine in the Corrido],” *Revista Mexicana de Sociología* 62, no. 2 (2000), 160.

¹⁷⁵ Helena Simonett, “Los Gallos Valientes [Coragous Roosters]: Examining Violence in Mexican Popular Music,” *Revista Transcultural de Musica* 10, (2006), <http://www.sibetrans.com/trans/articulo/149/los-gallos-valientes-examining-violence-in-mexican-popular-music>.

¹⁷⁶ Montoya and Fernández, “El Narcocorrido en México,” 220.

¹⁷⁷ Juan C. Ramírez-Pimienta, “Del Corrido De Narcotráfico al Narcocorrido: Orígenes y Desarrollo del Canto a los Traficantes [From the Drug Trafficking Corrido to the Narcocorrido: Origins and Development of the Singing to Traffickers],” *Studies in Latin America Popular Culture* 23, <http://www-rohan.sdsu.edu/~jramire/corrido.pdf>, 25.

¹⁷⁸ Avatia, *Historical Mexican Corrido*, 128.

of Robin Hood, emerged. According to Ovalle, the narco-cultura started to be open and drug-trafficking groups began to be seen as legitimate, taking on the responsibilities of the government and educational and religious sectors and providing basic social services to rural communities. They also assumed the role of heroes and benefactors, presenting themselves as people of progress and social acceptance.¹⁷⁹ Because drug-trafficking groups are based on illegal activities, they used, and still use, intimidation, violence, and death to ensure compliance with their policies.

6. The Strengthening of the Narco-Cultura

In the early 1980s, the Mexican government started to refer to groups engaged in the production and distribution of drug as “cartels.”¹⁸⁰ Drug trafficking was seen as an inherited problem of the past, having evolved from a marginal phenomenon in the mountains of Sinaloa to a part of everyday life in the city, while winning the acceptance of the urban and rural populations.¹⁸¹ The war on drugs was increased during this decade; but the cartels innovated strategies to circumvent government interference. In Sinaloa, after the government failed to stamp out drug trafficking, the struggle took on a cultural coloration. No longer a subculture, the narco-cultura became a strong movement in which the actions of traffickers were legitimized while those of the government lost legitimacy.

In Sinaloa, narco-corridos punctuated the decade with lyrics valorizing the narco-cultura, along with tales of adventure and violence characterized by crudity, murder, and massacre. Ragland notes that in this period the government censored media broadcasting of narco-corridos to protect youth from the exaltation of violence.¹⁸² In response, the Banda Sinaloense, a popular corridos band, recorded a new album, “*Corridos Prohibidos*,” with songs glorifying the narco-lifestyle and criticizing the government

¹⁷⁹ Lilian P. Ovalle Marroquin, “Narcotráfico y Poder. Campo de Lucha por la Legitimidad [Narcotrafficking and Power. Golf Struggle for Legitimacy],” *Athenea Digital* 17, (2010): 84–6, <https://ddd.uab.cat/pub/athdig/15788946n17/15788946n17p77.pdf>

¹⁸⁰ Astorga, *The Century of Drugs*, 87.

¹⁸¹ Jorge A. Sánchez, “Institutionalizing Processes the Narco in Sinaloa,” *Frontera Norte* 21, no. 41(2009), 88–91.

¹⁸² Ragland, *Nothern Music*, 160.

corruption and alliances with cartels that had resulted in corrido censorship.¹⁸³ In the late 1980s, the narco-corridos recovered cultural force, from their setback in 1960s, achieving greater impact and acceptance during the next decade.¹⁸⁴ In the 1990s, notes Astorga, government corruption was prominent in media coverage, as leaders fell due to corruption and association with cartels.¹⁸⁵ While the government continued to fight drug trafficking, narco-cultura, and corrupt officials, the youth adopted the image of the narco by dressing northern-Mexican-ranchero (Sinaloa) style, in hats, silk shirts, jackets, cowboy boots of exotic leathers, big buckles, and gold chains.¹⁸⁶

7. Last Decade and a Dash: Narco-Corridos and the Narco-Cultura

In Mexico, the fight against drug trafficking can be placed in the period 2000–2006. After seventy-one years of a dictatorial government monopolized by the same political party, it was time for change. This new regime was known as “the government of change” because of the many plans, projects, and promises they made in their electoral campaign, but it inherited the sad reality of a country plagued by the narco-cultura and a corrupt establishment. Morales Oyarbide notes that the breakdown of the country was not the direct result of poor governance, but was hastened by a phenomenon that had grown and formed a very long time: the narco-cultura.¹⁸⁷ Mexico’s president of change, Vicente Fox, made a promise to dismantle the drug cartels, which never came to pass; he declared war on drug trafficking like his predecessors, however, giving priority to curbing violence, removing corruption within the government, and eliminating drug trafficking.¹⁸⁸ In 2001, Los Tigres del Norte released an album entitled “*Uniendo*

¹⁸³ Ramírez-Pimienta, “Del Corrido De Narcotráfico al Narcocorrido,” 33–36.

¹⁸⁴ Simonett, *En Sinaloa Nací*, 173

¹⁸⁵ Astorga, *The Century of Drugs*, 97.

¹⁸⁶ Sam Quiñones, *Historias Verdaderas del Otro México: Crónicas Insólitas* [True Stories of the Other Mexico: Oddly Chronicles] (Federal District, Mexico: Planeta, 2002), 32.

¹⁸⁷ César Morales-Oyarbide. “El Fracaso de una Estrategia: Una Crítica a la Guerra Contra el Narcotráfico en Mexico, Sus Justificaciones y Efectos [Failure of a Strategy: A Criticism of the drug war in Mexico, its Justifications and Effects],” *Nueva Sociedad* 231 (2011), 8, http://nuso.org/media/articles/downloads/3749_1.pdf.

¹⁸⁸ Paola Gutiérrez-Cuéllar, Gabriela Magdaleno del Río, & Viridiana Yáñez-Rivas, “Violencia, Estado y crimen organizado en Mexico [Violence, State and Organized Crime in Mexico],” *El Cotidiano*, 163 (2010), 109. <http://www.redalyc.org/articulo.oa?id=32515913013>.

Frontera;” one of their hits was “*Crónicas de un Cambio*” (Chronicles of a Change), criticizing the government of Fox and government-imposed censorship.¹⁸⁹

From 2000–2006, the government proved powerless to combat drug trafficking. It ended up defeated by the cartels, destroyed by corruption, penetrated by trafficking within government institutions, and shocked by an overwhelming increase in violence—the war on drugs was a fiasco, a lost war.¹⁹⁰ The subsequent government (2006–2012) conceived the problem of organized crime as a matter of national emergency, but the government was unsuccessful in combating criminal groups, helpless against an swell of violence affecting every stratum of Mexican society. For instance, 2004–2010 was one of the bloodiest periods in Sinaloa history. The Mexican government maintained its position that the deaths, violence, and insecurity in Mexico were the direct result of drug cartels. The conflict fueled the lyrics of corridos, which included songs about capo accomplishments and defeats, cartel alliances and battles, pacts and ruptures due to political corruption, crimes, massacres, beheadings, disappearances, and praise for the narco-saints. Simply put, the narco-corridos captured and fed back the daily reality of Mexico yesterday, today—and possibly tomorrow.

B. SINALOA CARTEL: NARCO-CORRIDOS AND JESUS MALVERDE

Sinaloa is the birthplace of the narco-corridos and where the identity of the narco was legitimized. It is in the mainstream of today’s narco-corridos as the place where the famous Los Tigres del Norte emerged, along with the powerful Sinaloa cartel, which is mainly established in Culiacan. The cartel’s operations cover most of the northern states of Mexico. This section looks into how the Sinaloa cartel uses narco-corridos, in particular those of Los Tigres del Norte, to recruit members and perpetuate the cult of Jesus Malverde.

¹⁸⁹ Ramírez-Pimienta, *Singing to the Narcos*, 189.

¹⁹⁰ Morales-Oyarbide. “El Fracaso de una Estrategia,” 9.

1. Narco-Corridos as a Recruiting Tool

Music has always been one a pillar in the formation of culture, and in turn influences the habits, perceptions, and emotions of individuals. Throughout history, music has undergone continual evolution, and every era has a defining musical style. Music plays an important role in the development of adolescent identity, as it is observed that adolescents develop and express their character through clothing, hairstyles, language, and music.¹⁹¹ Young people join groups with others they can identify with. As they grow within a circle of friends, they tend to adopt the behaviors around them.¹⁹² A desire to be independent from the family often drives them to associate with a peer group and become dependent on this association, until a new belief system is established. Group members act according to their beliefs, which are reinforced through the connecting element of music. The music embedded in the narco-cultura dictates how to dress, comb one's hair, move, and express oneself and provides a set of beliefs on which to base identity and group membership. Be original, independent or rebellious—or go with the current in an environment plagued by the narco-cultura. Expressing individuality or maybe drowning resentment of a corrupt government can be done passively and at little social cost by listening to a particular brand of popular music. Thus, corrido music is able to influence individuals from very different social classes to buy into the narco-cultura.

Martin notes that narco-corridos are a recruiting tool that cartels exploit in enticing others to join their ranks.¹⁹³ The narco-corridos express the aspirations of future drug-lords and members of drug-trafficking organizations, who are often drawn from the socially disadvantaged and economically dislocated. Meanwhile, the narcos themselves are seen to cruise the streets in luxury cars and flash extravagant jewelry while playing corridos that glorify their lifestyle, provoking envy and establishing status.¹⁹⁴ Drug lords may attempt to legitimize their activities by acting as respected members of society, and

¹⁹¹ Adrian C. North and David J. Hargreaves, "Music and Adolescent Identity," *Music Education Research* 1, no. 2 (1999), 75–80.

¹⁹² Ibid.

¹⁹³ Martín Meráz-García, "A Theoretical Approach: An Exploratory Analysis of Higher Level Narcotraffickers of Latin American Decent," Washington State University, (2007), <http://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/download?doi=10.1.1.428.897&rep=rep1&type=pdf>.

¹⁹⁴ Meráz-García, "A Theoretical Approach: Narcotraffickers."

even heroes. This public-relations effort makes the recruitment process much easier and inflames a desire for the same quality of life, in particular among the poor whom government has failed.¹⁹⁵ The narco-corrido is not just entertainment, but, for those who dream of better future, it is a gateway to hope, however, dangerous. The problem is not the existence of narco-corridos per se, but their seductiveness to receptive minds as the exploits of drug daring traffickers and kingpins are woven into the day-to-day consciousness of the Sinaloan people.

Before 1990, the norteño bands composed corridos in honor of folk-hero bandits, recounting their adventures, loves, and legends. Their stories moved the people without arousing a desire for rivalry or violence, and the tragic endings of the corridos implied a moral lesson that discouraged emulation. Thus, the composers were safe from accusations of sympathizing with crime. By contrast, Tatum notes that composers and singers affiliated with cartels have suffered “death threats, being shot after performances, and even killed.”¹⁹⁶ Los Tigres del Norte were not as cautious when they recorded “*El Jefe de Jefes*,” a ballad in honor of Amado Carrillo, “*El Señor de los Cielos*” (The Lord of Heaven), the most powerful drug lord of the 1990s and leader of the Juarez drug cartel. Although the songwriters omitted the name of Carrillo, their intention was to pay reverence and romanticize the drug lord.¹⁹⁷ Since then, “bragging of the slag” has exploded and the narcos now cultivate the publicity they previously avoided.

The traditional corrido has fallen into neglect, along with the charm of the genre, as the Sinaloan corrido ban began a new stage in corrido development: the *movimiento alterado*, in which the artists no longer hesitate to speak for the drug cartels and, in fact, make reference to bloody deeds in the first person, as if the singer himself had committed the crime. Valenzuela mentions in an interview that the movimiento alterado represents the third generation of corrido development, in which compositions describe the hard

¹⁹⁵ Meráz-García, “A Theoretical Approach: Narcotraffickers.”

¹⁹⁶ Charles M. Tatum, *Encyclopedia of Latino Culture: From Calaveras to Quinceaneras* [3 Volumes], (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 2013), 978.

¹⁹⁷ Valenzuela Arce, *Boss of Bosses*, 219.

reality of drug trafficking, including uncontrolled violence and death.¹⁹⁸ One of the most viewed narco-corrido videos on YouTube is “*Sanguinarios del M1*,” the theme song of the movimiento alterado, with more than 13 million hits as of February 2016. In this official video, several musical groups, duets, and soloists, waving their hands as if they held weapons, openly romanticize the power of the Sinaloa cartel and declaring their admiration for Joaquin “el Chapo” Guzmán, Ismael “el Mayo” Zambada García, and even Pancho Villa and other heroes. A short-and-sweet part of the lyric:

Con cuerno de chivo y bazuca en la nuca
Volando cabezas al que se atraviesa
Somos sanguinarios, locos bien ondeados
Nos gusta matar.
Pa dar levantones somos los mejores
Siempre en caravana toda la perrada
Muy bien pertrechados, blindados y listos
Para ejecutar.¹⁹⁹

Translation:
With goat horn and bazooka on the neck
Blowing heads to anyone who gets in the way
We are bloody, very cool crazies
We like to kill
We are the best at picking up girls
Always in caravan, with all the dirty tricks,
Well-armed, armored, and ready
To execute.²⁰⁰

¹⁹⁸ “Movimiento Alterado: Cuando el Narco ‘Sale del Closet’ [Altered Movement: When the Narco ‘Comes Out of the Closet’] in an Interview with José M. Valenzuela Arce,” MillenioDigital, July 2014, http://www.milenio.com/region/Movimiento-alterado-narco-sale-closet_0_276572792.html.

¹⁹⁹ “Movimiento Alterado - Sanguinarios del M1 [Bloodthirsty of M1] (Video Oficial),” YouTube video, 2:36, from an oficial video by Sanguinarios del M1, posted by “TwinsCuliacanTv,” 26 October 2011, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rzod0gFjHIw>.

²⁰⁰ Ibid.

The festive tone of the singers, who are dressed like narcos with solid gold necklaces and crucifixes and bracelets with precious stones that complement the intimidating and bold lyrics, aims to terrorize Sinaloa cartel rivals and to impress the public with their status and power. In the 1990s, Simonett observes some of the elements of the narco-cultura that persist today (translated):

Most of these men wear thick gold medallions on their chest with the image of Malverde and a medal of the Virgin of Guadalupe and Jesus crucifix... The price of such silk shirt is equivalent to forty days of income earned by a farmer (the minimum wage in Mexico in 1996 was U.S. \$3). Its price in Los Angeles covers between \$50 and \$200 dollars and the gold chains and medals are priced from \$10,000.²⁰¹

Narco-corridos are similar to the rap or hip-hop music of today in the boastfulness of the lyrics. But the jovial tunes of these hymns of destruction, which could be played at a fair, trivialize the horror of the words and cheapen the value of human life. Mexico is probably the only country where the narcos can boast of their killings with such frivolousness. A significant detail of the video is that none of the singers tries to hide his identity. Their names are displayed onscreen—perhaps they trust the protection afforded to them by “el Mayo” and “el Chapo,” as claimed by one of the singers: “*Soy el número 1, de clave M1, respaldado por el Mayo y por el Chapo*” (I am number 1, of key M1, backed by el Mayo and el Chapo). It is evident that these narcos feel untouchable, or they would not confess their crimes in the media. Nevertheless, the most disturbing aspect is that these narcos fill ballrooms with their parties and receive ovations when boasting of their beheadings. The recent ban on narco-corridos in Sinaloa and other states was motivated no doubt by the movimiento alterado, but even if the government managed to staunch the broadcasting of these songs, the youth would still hear them through the Internet.²⁰² Therefore, it is unlikely the government will silence the narco-corridos. In Mexico, the general complacency about corruption is ingrained; prohibitions will not win the cultural war against drugs. Narco-corridos have become an important element in

²⁰¹ Simonett, *En Sinaloa Nací*, 244.

²⁰² “Prohibidos los Narcocorridos en Sinaloa [Narcocorridos Prohibited in Sinaloa],” Univision.com, 25 February 2016, <http://www.univision.com/shows/noticiero-univision/prohibidos-los-narcocorridos-en-sinaloa-video>.

Mexican culture not only because they provoke fantasies of a more glamorous life but also because the lyrics chronicle struggles that the Mexican people have actually endured. They are perceived as realistic and truthful.

2. Sinaloa: The Tale of Jesus Malverde

Mexican drug-related violence is among the highest in the world, extending to all areas of society. It is not surprising, then, that its culture contains a religious stream directly linked to drug trafficking and the narco-cultura. In this context, the cult of Malverde is an expression of a popular religiosity long present in Mexico. The cult has a mythical status and devotional aspects much like traditional religious piety.

a. A Fantasy, but Real

A figure that has become famous in Mexican popular mysticism is the “saint of the narcos” Jesús Malverde (Figure 4). Malverde fulfills the narco-saint condition of “illegality;” that is, at some point and for different reasons, he was persecuted and condemned by the Mexican government. It is believed that Malverde was born in the late 19th century as Jesús Juárez Mazo (1870–1909).²⁰³ There is no conclusive evidence as to his actual historical existence, but of the differing versions of his life, the most accepted proposes that he was born in Sinaloa around 1870.²⁰⁴ He is traditionally believed to have been a construction or railroad worker in the construction of the western railway and Southern Pacific railroad, which reached the Culiacan line from the north in 1905.²⁰⁵ But Price also provides an account of Jesús as a carpenter.²⁰⁶ It is believed his parents died of hunger due to excessive abuse by landowners.²⁰⁷ The legend recounts that this great wrong caused Jesús to take justice into his own hands. He became a kind of Robin Hood

²⁰³ Patricia L. Price, *Dry Place: Landscapes of Belonging and Exclusion*, (Minneapolis, MN: Minnesota University Press, 2004), 156.

²⁰⁴ Price, *Dry Place*, 156.

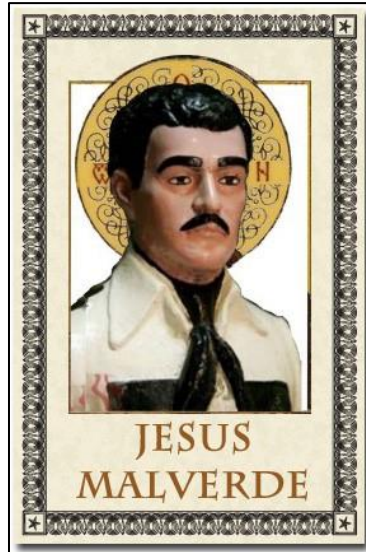
²⁰⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 157.

²⁰⁷ Ensley F. Guffey and Dale K. Koontz, *Wanna Cook?: The Complete, Unofficial Companion to Breaking Bad*, (Toronto, Ontario: ECW Press, 2014), 124.

in the mountains of Sinaloa, a bandit who stole from the rich to give to the poor, who in turn protected the bandit-hero from the authorities.²⁰⁸

Figure 4. Jesus Malverde



Source: John Nova Lomax, “Know Your Narco Saints,” Houston Press, 12 September 2012, <http://www.houstonpress.com/news/santa-muerte-know-your-narco-saints-6595551>.

It is believed that his assaults on the wealthy drove the governor, General Francisco Cañedo, a compadre of Porfirio Diaz, to offer a reward for his capture.²⁰⁹ Among the different accounts of his death is the claim that Jesús Juárez Mazo was arrested and executed by the rural police, while others say that a friend betrayed him for the bounty. Another version affirms the goodness of the bandit, relating that he was wounded in a clash with the law and asked a friend to turn him in to collect the reward and distribute it to the poor. In any case, it is believed that Jesús died on May 3, 1909.²¹⁰ After his death, his body was hung from a tree and denied proper burial as a punishment

²⁰⁸ Norma E. Cantú and Olga Nájera-Ramírez, *Chicana Traditions: Continuity and Change*, (Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2002), 119.

²⁰⁹ Price, *Dry Place*, 157.

²¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 156.

and a warning to his followers.²¹¹ From the “goodness” and “martyrdom” of Jesús Juárez Mazo emerged the popular devotion to the narco-saint, who today is known as Jesús Malverde, from the dense green forest, “el mal verde” (bad green), from which he robbed the rich and “associated with misfortune.”²¹²

Malverde is linked to miraculous signs such as the finding and return of a lost cow or healing of cancer in exchange for stones to help cover his body. Price states that the local people buried his bones and covered them with rocks. Throwing stones at the grave was considered a sign of respect and a way to petition his spirit and remind people of proper behaviors.²¹³ Tales of his intervention passed from mouth to mouth, making Malverde the figure he is today—one of the most revered narco-saints in the country and on either side of the border.

b. *The Malverde Cult*

The figure of Malverde has developed around a syncretic cult that taps into popular Catholic beliefs mixed with inclusions that the Church considers erroneous or superstitions. As Malverde has not been beatified by the Catholic Church, he is not officially considered a saint, but a “spirit.” Nevertheless, his figure may appear among popular Catholic saints such as San Judas Tadeo, and the Virgin of Guadalupe.²¹⁴ In general, the cult is strongly impregnated with the uses and customs of Catholicism; for example, novenas are held on his behalf. While Malverde, a thief whose actual existence has not been verified, is far from being beatified by the Catholic Church—much less looked upon as a heroic figure by the state²¹⁵—his followers regard him as a folk saint.²¹⁶ Malverde is often linked with the narco-cultura and commonly referred to as the patron saint of the narcos (*narco-santón*) in Sinaloa. Malverde’s devotees come from all

²¹¹ Vanderwood, *Juan Soldado*, 63.

²¹² Price, *Dry Place*, 157

²¹³ *Ibid.*, 23–24.

²¹⁴ Vanderwood, *Juan Soldado*, 212–262.

²¹⁵ Price, *Dry Place*, 159.

²¹⁶ Vanderwood, *Juan Soldado*, 175.

social classes, within and outside the drug trade.²¹⁷ Price notes that the narco-santón has three main shrines where devotees may pray and ask for protection in the production and trafficking of drugs (see Figure 5). The first is located in Culiacan, Mexico, a few steps away from the Sinaloa government buildings. The second is in Cali, Colombia, and the third is in Los Angeles, California. It is said that Malverde especially protects illegal migrants and their families and the poor facing criminal charges.²¹⁸

Figure 5. Jesus Malverde Shrine in Culiacán, Mexico



Source: Emma Leyva Valdez, “El lugar Donde Veneran al ‘Bandido Generoso’ [The Place Where Revere ‘the Generous Bandit’],” *El Debate*, 29 Jul 2015, <http://www.debate.com.mx/culiacan/El-lugar-donde-veneran-al-Bandido-Generoso-20150729-0018.html>.

A significant component of Mexican culture is religious expression. At different times in Mexican history, local saints have been incorporated into Catholic beliefs. The Church has accepted some cults and outlawed others and has intervened concerning the devotion to narco-saints. Nevertheless, many Mexican-born saints are venerated outside of the approval of the institutional Church, and Jesus Malverde is among them. Particularly in the city of Culiacan, the mythical figure of Malverde, a sociable, generous,

²¹⁷ Price, *Dry Place*, 156.

²¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 159.

and martyred thief, has been adopted since the 1950s as an intercessor for marginalized individuals, outlaws, thieves, murderers, and cartels.

The powerful mythology and symbolic image of Jesus Malverde is expressed in many ways in Culiacán society, language, religion, and lifestyle.²¹⁹ His veneration reflects both a general admiration within Mexican society for the irreverent hero and an accretion of superstition and sanctity around his persona for over a century.²²⁰ The cult of Malverde was appropriated in the 1970s by Sinaloan cartels who looked for the protection and spiritual shelter of a demigod who would not challenge their violence and crime, who was not cramped by ecclesiastical formalities, and whom they could approach directly, without any need for repentance, regardless of social or economic conditions or even the contents of their petitions. Most important, this exalted being looked and dressed like them, with a face and a cultural heritage like their own. Within the cult of Malverde, the narco-corridos became a musical form of worship and a platform for testimony as to the protection and miracles granted through his martyrdom.

From the beginning, Malverde devotees have sought help for desperate causes. As his petitioners receive an answer and relate their stories, the cult of the narco-santón grows. Many petitions are for justice in a society abandoned by the government, in which they are prey to inequality, poverty, and drug violence. Malverde is seen to stand with his devotees in the reality of their broken world and damaged identity. The cult expanded beyond the Sinaloan region as it accompanies tens of thousands of Mexicans crossing the border into the United States.

The miracle a petitioner begs for may involve a way to cross a load of drugs into the most affluent market in the world. Others ask to avoid being caught by the U.S. Border Patrol and to get a job that frees them from endemic poverty.²²¹ The grateful and hopeful have built small shrines to their benefactor along migration and drug-trafficking routes, and smugglers do not care to cross the border without wearing a Malverde scapular around their necks. It is not strange to find a shrine in fields of marijuana or

²¹⁹ Price, *Dry Place*, 156–59.

²²⁰ Kail, *Narco-Cults*, 35.

²²¹ Vanderwood, *Juan Soldado*, 211

opium.²²² The cult of Malverde is not centered in Culiacan alone; there are shrines in many cities and countries, such as Jalisco and Guerrero in Michoacán; Cali in Colombia; Los Angeles in California, and most of the border.²²³

The faith of Malverde cultists is based the miraculous works of the narco-santón, the thought of which gives his devotees strength to pursue their plans and protest the corrupt government, knowing that the cult is strengthening on its way north. Ultimately, the legend of Malverde articulates the crushed dreams of the Mexican people, who find solace in the saint of Sinaloa.

c. Songs to the Narco-Santón (Narco-Saint)

There are two types of corridos about Malverde: some tell his story and others sing his praises. In the first case, reciting the facts of the bandit's life is not the main point; rather, the song is ritualistic, an act of prayer and promise that is sacred and festive. These corridos are very different from the narco-corridos, which narrate the narco lifestyle. They are liturgical, but independent from and, indeed, rejected by the Church, which will not assign legitimacy to unorthodox and sacrilegious worship, however popular it may be in the parishes. Mondaca-Cota notes that an investigation of twenty narco-corridos found social and cultural elements that associated narco-corridos with popular religion, for instance, the belief of Jesus Malverde.²²⁴ The cultic devotion to the bandit is expressed through narco-corridos, beer drinking, and other narco life-styles. Also, in the chapel of Malverde in Culiacan is a small book (see Figure 6) entitled "*La Verdadera Novena del Anima de Jesus Malverde*" ("The True Novena of the Spirit of Jesús Malverde"). The prayer for the sixth day of the novena extols the importance of music:

¡Música para ti. Oh Malverde! Eres alegre. Alegre es tu Corazón. Nunca la tristeza, ni el temor te doblegaron: ¡Música de Banda!, que te toquen (El

²²² Wald, *Narcocorrido*, 61.

²²³ Kail, *Narco-Cults*, 175–76.

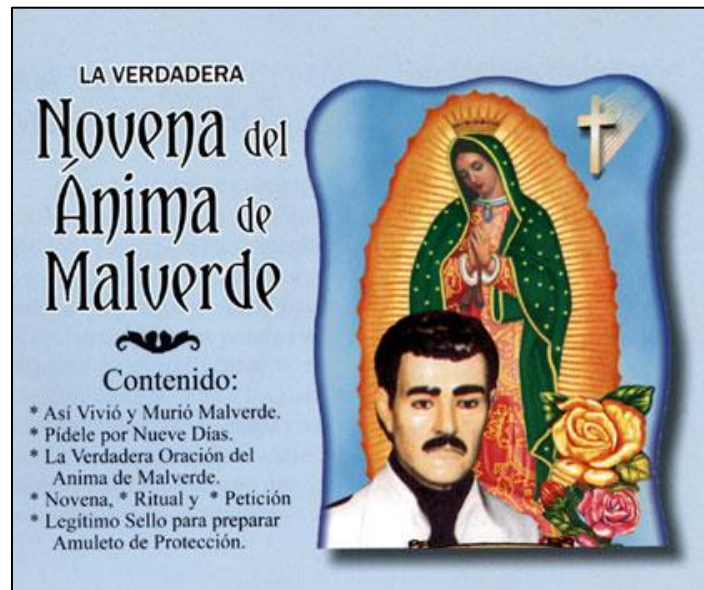
²²⁴ Anajilda Mondaca-Cota, "Narcocorridos, Ciudad y Vida Cotidiana: Espacios de Expresión de la Narcocultura en Culiacán, Sinaloa, México México [Narcocorridos, City and Everyday Life: Spaces of Expression narcoculture in Culiacan, Sinaloa, Mexico]," (Doctoral Dissertation, Instituto Tecnológico y de Estudios Superiores de Occidente, 2012).

Sinaloense) y que tus oídos se llenen de sus notas y que tus pensamientos y tú alegría contagien el ambiente. Rodéame con tu música, que se oiga fuerte la tambora para que no haya ruidos que me delaten. Haz que toquen fuerte.²²⁵

Translation:

Music for you, Oh Malverde! You are happy. Happy is your heart. Sadness, nor fear overpowered you: Band music! they play for you (the Sinaloan) and fill your ears with musical notes and let your thoughts and joy catch the environment. Surround me with your music; let the drum sound strong; there is no noise that betrays me. Make them play strong.

Figure 6. True Ninth Anima Jesus Malverde



Source: “La Verdadera Novena del Anima de Jesus Malverde [True Ninth Anima Jesus Malverde],” WisdomProducts, <https://www.wisdomproducts.com/images/products/legacy/large/1418.jpg>.

Outside the Malverde shrine in Culiacan, a band plays narco-corridos without any apparent prompting, but in truth, they are paid to sing as a tribute to Malverde in gratitude for successful drug crossings into the United States. For instance, one verse of a song says:

²²⁵ Enrique Flores and Raúl Eduardo González, “Jesús Malverde: Plegarias y Corridos [Jesus Malverde: Prayers and Corridos],” *Revista de Literaturas Populares*, VI-1 (2006): 35, <http://ru.ffyl.unam.mx:8080/jspui/handle/10391/2695>.

Las garitas que he cruzado
Las cruzo sin ni un problema;
Nunca he visto luces rojas,
Siempre me las ponen verde,
Pero eso yo se lo debo
A la imagen de Malverde.²²⁶

Translation:

The watchtowers I have crossed,
I crossed them without even a problem;
I have never seen red lights,
Always I see them green,
But that I owe it to
The image of Malverde.

The good bandit of popular imagination is shown in the following verse of the song, “*La Raza Contenta*” by Banda MS and dedicated to Malverde:

El dinero es muy bonito
Sabiéndolo disfrutar:
Mujeres, vino y cerveza,
Que todo lo que el mundo da,
Pero no olvido una cosa:
Ayudar a los demás.²²⁷

²²⁶ Flores and González, “Jesus Malverde: Prayers and Corridos,” *Revista de Literaturas Populares*, VI-1 (2006): 35, <http://ru.ffyl.unam.mx:8080/jspui/handle/10391/2695>.

²²⁷ *Ibid.*, 37.

Translation:

Money is very nice
Knowing how to enjoy it:
Women, wine and beer,
Everything the world gives,
But I do not forget one thing:
Helping others.

Kail notes that the glamor of the narco-cultura is one of materialism, in which money is above all things.²²⁸ This can be seen in the narco-corridos, as Malverde devotees make their petitions—materialistic and personal end-goals—known to the narco-santón, as in the following verse of “*Las Mañanitas a Malverde*,” by Gildo Garcia:

Año con año le piden
Que bien les vaya en los bisnes;
Le prenden sus veladoras
Al milagroso Malverde;
Poco tiempo da de plazo
Pa que tengan lo que quieren.²²⁹

Translation:

Every year they ask you
That it may go well in business;
They light their candles
To the miraculous Malverde;
A short time passes
For them to have whatever they want.

²²⁸ Kail, *Narco Cult*, 46.

²²⁹ Flores and González, “Jesús Malverde: Prayers y Corridos,” 40.

The composer Jose Alberto Sepulveda stated in an interview, “to Malverde we sing stories, praises, prayers, thanksgiving, and we ask for help.”²³⁰ He recounts that the main Malverde prayer was recorded and starts as follows:

Hoy ante tu cruz postrado,
Oh, Malverde, mi señor,
Te pido misericordia
Y que alivies mi dolor.²³¹

Translation:

Today, I prostrate before your cross,
O Malverde, my lord,
I ask mercy
And healing for my pain.

The fact that a Malverde’s shrine is a place of festivals, dance, lectures, and alcohol, along with the performance of corridos on request, makes them an offering to Malverde. These corridos are captured and offered for sale at the shrines of Malverde as pirated or illegal CDs recorded without permission—and subsequently denounced by the artists as fraudulent goods, without anyone claiming copyright.

C. CONCLUSION

Though the reality of the drug trade is chilling and horrific, the narco subculture has metastasized throughout Mexican society by wrapping itself in two familiar and well-loved aspects of Mexican life: music and religion. The jaunty tunes of the narco-corridos are easy to like and respond to, but they carry a payload of lyrics celebrating murder and desolation—messages that would be difficult to swallow without accompaniment. Similarly, the cult of Malverde draws on the distress of the Mexican campesino and his

²³⁰ Enrique Flores, and Raúl E. González. *Malverde: Exvotos y Corridos* [Malverde: Exvotos and Corridos], Universidad Autónoma de México, 2011, 77

²³¹ *Ibid.*

sentimental identification with the poor and downtrodden to elevate a figure from the mists of legend into an alternative Jesus—a sympathetic, helpful, indulgent, blood-stained antichrist who aids and abets organized crime. This appropriation of music and religion by the narco-cultura has been highly effective in recruitment and normalization and is very difficult to counter, as any effort to suppress them makes resistance look all the more heroic, necessary, and right.

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IV. MEXICO'S "UNOFFICIAL SAINTS"

The narco-cultura is a fusion of the history, common experience, fears, hopes, and sentiments of a people—a popular culture in which religion and family are above democracy and institutions, and religion is shaped by a local struggle to maintain personal power and identity in the face of a dismissive government. Adherents mainly in the north of Mexico have shaped the narco-cultura and, thanks to emigration, expanded the cult internationally. The importance of the narco-cultura's ability to provide individuals with elements of social identity and security should not be underestimated. The narco-cultura blends religious belief with syncretic distortions, improvised devotions, and pragmatism to create a dark but powerful spiritual elixir. This chapter discusses the role of the narco-saints within this culture and looks closely at the cults of La Santa Muerte and Juan Soldado and how they influence the narco to do what they do.

A. NARCO-SAINTS: BACKGROUND

1. The Creation of Images

Christianity teaches that its founder, Jesus Christ, was a zealous and observant Jew who lived according to the religious laws of Israel. He was the expected messiah, the Lord and Savior awaited by God's people and anticipated in biblical prophecy.²³² After his death, resurrection, and ascension into heaven, his disciples began spreading the gospel according to his mandate, first to their fellow Jews and then to gentiles as well. At first, "the way" was considered a sect or cult within Judaism; but as they were expelled from the synagogues over the core issue of the identity of Jesus, the "Christians" became known by a new name.²³³ The expansion of Christianity during the first century was swift; in less than 50 years, the gospel reached Rome. By 100 CE, Christianity had propagated throughout the major cities of the eastern Mediterranean, with a leadership organized hierarchically, according to bishops, priests, and laity, as the "one holy,

²³² Larry Aldrich, *One Gospel with Fulfilled Prophecies: The Life of Jesus Christ Merged and Paraphrased*, (Bloomington, IN: Trafford Publishing, 2012), 9.

²³³ *Ibid.*, 143.

catholic, and apostolic Church.”²³⁴ For the first 300 years, Rome persecuted Christianity, though it tolerated most other cults and religions, because the Christian monotheism forbade worship of the emperor as a god—a civic duty under the state religion.²³⁵

As centuries passed, Christians developed expressions of faith and exercises for promoting holiness. Two of these were monasticism and the pilgrimage.²³⁶ Both date to the early centuries of the Middle Ages and continued to develop throughout medieval times. As persecution ceased with the fall of Rome, the Church grew in wealth and power but became poor in virtues.²³⁷ Some Christians who sought a higher degree of spiritual discipline withdrew from the world into monasteries, practicing chastity, poverty, service, and penitence.

A pilgrimage is an individual or collective trip taken for spiritual reasons to a hallowed destination to receive a particular good, whether material or spiritual. Christians traveled to places associated with Christ, the apostles, and martyrs,²³⁸ especially from the fourth century, though further development and popularity of the Christian pilgrimage took place during the high Middle Ages, with Jerusalem, Rome, and Santiago de Compostela as the most famous destinations. This tradition is still alive today.

During the eleventh century, Europe experienced many transformations, including the invention of the university²³⁹ in response to the expansion of trade, which required merchants and secular clerks to read, write, and calculate, and to explore and disseminate the new knowledge brought from the East via the Crusades.²⁴⁰ With the rise of the universities, Christian scholasticism came out from the monasteries, where it had been preserved for centuries, and set up in the cities. Rules such as those of St. Benedict and

²³⁴ Susan T. Hitchcock and John L. Esposito, *Geography of Religion: Where God Lives, Where Pilgrims Walk* (Washington, DC: National Geographic, 2004), 281.

²³⁵ Hitchcock and Esposito, *Geography of Religion*, 281.

²³⁶ *Ibid.*, 298–306.

²³⁷ *Ibid.*, 241.

²³⁸ *Ibid.*, 298–306.

²³⁹ *Ibid.*, 405.

²⁴⁰ Edward R. Norman, *The Roman Catholic Church: An Illustrated History*, (University of California Press, 2007), 81.

St. Augustine had traditionally governed monastic orders.²⁴¹ In the early thirteenth century, new, cloistered orders such as the Franciscans arose, owning nothing and preaching among the people, practicing poverty and living off the donations of the faithful as mendicant orders. No longer known as “monks,” these friars and brothers left the solitude of the old orders, living among the people in cities where they practiced charitable service.²⁴² The friars began to attend the universities to acquire the education necessary to serve God and the faithful intellectually. Departing from medieval thought, which understood the mind of God as the beginning and *summa* of wisdom, creativity, and rationality, humanism arose to propose the development of man’s faculties apart from God, with man as the center and measure of all things. Intellectual reflection and critical skills were the fundamental principles in the thoughts and action of the Renaissance man. From this movement, an educated elite assumed power as the unifying element in European culture.

In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the Protestant Reformation occurred—a response to non-biblical accretions in the Roman Catholic Church. Rome reacted with the Counter-Reformation,²⁴³ a broad movement of renewal and transformation. Its main instrument was the Council of Trent, an instrument for real internal reform. For eighteen years (1545–1563) and two long interruptions (the second for almost ten years), a council met in Trent, Italy, to affirm Roman Catholicism as the source of understanding of the Christian life and as the organization representing Christ’s Church. At the council, two decrees were endorsed:

- The doctrinal decrees, in which Roman Catholic doctrine was set above that of the Protestants in all that relates to salvation, revelation, the sacraments, and the cult of the Virgin and saints.
- The disciplinary decrees, which aimed to reform the life of the clergy and Christians in general.²⁴⁴

²⁴¹ Norman, *The Roman Catholic Church*, 45.

²⁴² *Ibid.*, 78–79.

²⁴³ *Ibid.*, 135.

²⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 81–100

The Council of Trent defined the position of the Roman Church in relation to reformed doctrines and, along with the doctrinal and disciplinary decrees, looked at the role of religious representations, statues, and icons.²⁴⁵ Faced with the Protestant accusation that the Roman Church encouraged the idolatrous worship of images, the council rejected the accusation and affirmed the use of images, confirming a deeply rooted tradition in Catholicism. Images were an important means of conveying religious messages to those who could not read or write. Through the biblical stories and mysteries of redemption described in these images, people were reminded to meditate on their faith.²⁴⁶ Without denying the importance of the Virgin Mary, Protestantism opposed the beliefs that had become a cult in the Middle Ages. According to Catholic tradition, the Virgin Mary had a role as an intermediary between the faithful and God. Protestants found no evidence of such a function in the scriptures, in which “there is one God, and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus.”²⁴⁷ At the Council of Trent, Catholic theologians affirmed the role of the Virgin in the work of salvation and encouraged her veneration, thus reaffirming the saints as models and intercessors before God.²⁴⁸

2. The Making of Saints

Since the beginning, many faithful Christians have become known as saints in one way or another.²⁴⁹ In the Christian tradition, all believers are “Saints” according to St. Paul; but a canonized saint is one whose life of holiness and service has been recognized by the Church according to strict criteria. Those who believe a person to have been a Saint need not be saints themselves, but they should be able to recognize holiness and miracles; and once a name has been submitted for the process of canonization, Church investigators must be able to apply standard reason and forensic skills. The declaration of saints was originally unstructured, promoted by the local Christian communities among

²⁴⁵ Norman, *The Roman Catholic Church*, 92.

²⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 85.

²⁴⁷ I Timothy 2:5

²⁴⁸ Hitchcock and Esposito, *Geography of Religion*, 403.

²⁴⁹ Kenneth L. Woodward, *Making Saints: How The Catholic Church Determines Who Becomes a Saint, Who Doesn't, and Why* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996), 50.

whom these persons lived. After many centuries, however, the Church found it necessary to develop an extensive, methodical process, conducted by specialists, to curtail the proliferation of ad-hoc cults.²⁵⁰ The term “cult,” a system or community of religious worship and ritual, has acquired a negative connotation in the West, suggestive of oppressive, charismatic lunatics—most likely dangerous, as the case of the narco-saint San Nazario (the ex-leader of Los Caballeros Templarios). Christianity itself started as a despised cult that worshipped the Son of God, Jesus Christ. Truly, if Jesus Christ had not sacrificed himself for the sins of humanity through martyrdom, perhaps Christian’s veneration of saints or even Christianity would have never existed.²⁵¹

For the early Christians, respect and veneration towards martyrs and those of exemplary faith was an encouragement and example, an organic part of their own faith journey. Revered for holiness, saints have also been invoked for their “power,” which may reside especially in their bones or artifacts. The history of canonization is closely linked to the history of Christian cults. Even in its current rigid form, the canonization of saints essentially provides an official winnowing that authorizes the veneration of approved Saints. Canonization involves much more than a sincere declaration by the church—in the literal sense, it means to include them on the role of Saints. Throughout the centuries, Christian communities compiled their own lists of saints and martyrs, though many were lost over time. Official canonization tracks the heroes of the faith and also has a liturgical function, providing the names that populate the ordo calendar, it contains guidelines for Mass to be celebrated throughout the year, and Saints’ days, some of which are invoked in the Mass.²⁵²

As described by Fr. William Saunders of Our Lady of Hope parish in Potomac Falls, Virginia, canonization is an “official process for declaring someone a saint.”²⁵³ Development of the formal process began in 1234 and includes four major stages:²⁵⁴

²⁵⁰ Woodward, *Making Saints*, 50.

²⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 51.

²⁵² “Ordo,” YourDictionary, accessed 22 March 2016, <http://www.yourdictionary.com/ordo>.

²⁵³ William Saunders (Rev.), “The Process of Becoming a Saint,” Arlington Catholic Herald, <http://www.catholiceducation.org/en/culture/catholic-contributions/the-process-of-becoming-a-saint.html>.

- Proof that the person was a faithful servant of God and regarded as holy (not before five years after the death of the person. The local bishop investigates).
- Proof of the person's heroic virtue or martyrdom and orthodox belief in Catholic doctrine (evaluated by a panel of cardinals. If successful, declared "venerable" by the Pope).
- Proof of at least one miracle of God through the person after death (excludes martyrs who died as servants of God. If successful, declared "blessed" or "beatified" by the Pope).
- Proof of a second miracle through the intercession of the blessed or beatified person (includes martyrs)²⁵⁵

Usually the Church declares martyrs at the time of their death and may recognize them as holy about five years after.²⁵⁶ The year 313 was marked by the "legalization" of Christianity, a time when the graves of martyrs started to become places of worship. As local saints became well known to the Christian population, the Catholic Church put the date of their death anniversary in the Church calendar to celebrate a Mass in their honor. The calendar eventually became crowded with names. Once these saints were officially recognized, basilicas or shrines were often built on top of their burial sites—as was done for Jesus Malverde by the local community of Sinaloa.

It is impossible to see history and the dimensions of the Saints, official and unofficial, in their totality. Recent years have witnessed a revival of "Saints," but of a kind disapproved by the Catholic Church. It is impossible to understand the origins and role of unofficial saints apart from sainthood as defined by the Catholic Church. The evolution of the Mexican narco-saints involves controversy and cultishness in the most negative sense. Many of the narco-saints were criminals, bandits, and murderers or, alternatively, the direct, bloodthirsty image of death itself; nevertheless, in some countries, particularly Mexico, they are worshiped and adored.

²⁵⁴ Woodward, *Making Saints*, 67.

²⁵⁵ "Frequently Asked Questions about Saints: How does the Church choose saints?" Catholic.org, last modified December, 2015, <http://www.catholic.org/saints/faq.php>.

²⁵⁶ Woodward, *Making Saints*, 23.

3. Religious Syncretism: A Fusion of Beliefs

Religious syncretism is a phenomenon as old as religion itself and has been the basis for new religious movements in the twentieth century New Age.²⁵⁷ Syncretism refers to a union or mixture of two or more religious and cultural traditions, which accommodate and assimilate the union.²⁵⁸ The situation occurs when two religions are melted together or one adopts elements such as rites, dogmas, legends, and mythologies from the other. The interactions that fuse formerly separate belief systems give rise to a new religious identity. In pre-Colombian Mexico, for example, indigenous groups lived in societies with complex and well-established codes, in which religion and the worship of the gods were rooted in daily life.²⁵⁹ The imposition of Catholic doctrines and tradition through the conversion of the natives by the Catholic missionaries who arrived after the conquest, forced indigenous groups to abandon or alter their rites and traditions. The Catholic faith was received creatively by natives, Africans, and mestizos, who developed a new religious system that was meaningful to them, but departed to some extent from Catholic teachings. In Mexico and other Latin American countries, a mix of traditions and esoteric practices produced cults such as Santeria, spiritism, Palo Mayombe, *Curanderismo*, and, today, the narco-cults.²⁶⁰ Religious syncretism has been rife in Mexico for five hundred years, essentially creating a new popular religion.

Traditionally Catholic countries in Latin American have been widely infected by syncretism; Catholicism may be so modified and influenced by other cultures and religions as to be almost unrecognizable.²⁶¹ An example is the Mexican religion *Curanderismo* (folk healing), born in the clash of Catholic, Aztec, African, Native American, and witchcraft influences.²⁶² Another example is Santeria, a mixture of

²⁵⁷ Irina A. Levinskaya, "Syncretism—the Term and Phenomenon," *Tyndale Bulletin* 44.1 (1993) 117-18, http://www.tyndalehouse.com/tynbul/library/TynBull_1993_44_1_07_Levinskaya_Syncretism.pdf.

²⁵⁸ Eric Maroney, *SCM Core Text: Religious Syncretism*, (London: SCM Press, 2006), 6.

²⁵⁹ Valerie Hansen and Kenneth Curtis, *Voyages in World History*, (San Francisco: Cengage Learning, 2008), 518.

²⁶⁰ Tony M. Kail, *Magico-Religious Groups and Ritualistic Activities: A Guide for First Responders*, (Boca Raton, FL: CRC Press, Mar 20, 2008), i-viii.

²⁶¹ Kail, *Magico-Religious Groups and Ritualistic Activities*, 42.

²⁶² Kail, *Narco-Cults*, 153.

Catholicism and the culture and religion of Yoruban African slaves, which spread throughout the Spanish, French, English and Portuguese colonies.²⁶³ Devotees of Santeria cultivate good relations with the gods, called orishas, which are manifestations of the divine and have power over the world. To create and maintain these relationships, the devotee must practice rituals, and in return, the orishas help him achieve the destiny that God specified before his birth. Santeria followers are baptized and use Catholic objects and practices in their rites—for example, a ritual against the evil eye requires a bath with special herbs and three Lord’s prayers, three creeds, and three hail Marys. In Mexico, a variety of cults from African and other parts of the world are practiced and a sizeable portion of the population consults with practitioners of Curanderismo for healing.²⁶⁴

Historically, Mexican Catholicism has suffered tremendous fragmentation and syncretism, originally mixing elements from Catholicism with pagan, primarily Aztec, beliefs, as the Aztec peoples and African slaves preserved their beliefs and traditions while practicing the Catholicism thrust upon them.²⁶⁵ Many Catholics have no real understanding of Christian doctrine;²⁶⁶ the manifestations of their “faith” are part of a popular religion in which different faiths, practices, and allegiances are combined, as in veneration of the narco-saints. Religious syncretism is also seen manifest in the popular interpretations by indigenous artisans and mestizos of traditional Christian symbolism, with crucifixes incorporating sugar cane and corn, black angels and Christs, mestizo and mulatto virgins, devils with white complexions, and mythical characters.

A key example of religion in Mexico is the Virgin of Guadalupe, who through her association with familiar myths and symbols facilitated the evangelization of Mexico and is the undisputed symbol of Mexican Catholicism. On her saint’s day, 12 December,²⁶⁷ millions of people around the world visit her shrine to celebrate, pray, sing, ask,

²⁶³ Kail, *Magico-Religious Groups and Ritualistic Activities*, 42

²⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 109.

²⁶⁵ Ray B. Browne, *Rituals and Ceremonies in Popular Culture*, (Madison, Wisconsin: Popular Press, 1980), 110–16.

²⁶⁶ Kail, *Magico-Religious Groups and Ritualistic Activities*, 113.

²⁶⁷ Kail, *Magico-Religious Groups and Ritualistic Activities*, 110.

commend, and thank her for the many blessing received from her hand. They thus keep alive not only the religion imposed to them, but also the old roots of the past.²⁶⁸ The procession of Santa Muerte is a replica of that of the Virgin of Guadalupe. Mexicans use other Catholic saints syncretically as well—Indians, for example, maintained—their polytheism by matching their demigods to Catholic Saints, signs, and symbols²⁶⁹ in a syncretism is so subtle, even local priests believed that they were successful converting these groups. Syncretism is never static; it keeps evolving and changing, sometimes in complex ways, with points of unity and divergence, but always redefinition and a search for cultural identity and belief. New forms of syncretism in Mexico include celebration of the Day of the Dead, the cult of Santa Muerte, and worship of the narco-saints Jesus Malverde and Juan Soldado.

Religion in Mexico and the Caribbean expresses a tumultuous history. The European settlers tried to replace superstitious elements of the cultures they encountered and eradicate indigenous rituals such as human sacrifice. They imposed the Catholic faith by force in many cases, destroying temples and replacing them with churches built of the same stones. The destruction was devastating, but by no means complete. It was Catholic policy to emphasize whatever congenial similarities could be found with existing pre-Columbian religions, grafting new concepts in rather than replacing useful roots and innocuous beliefs held dear by the people.²⁷⁰ In Mexico, while there was no such care in converting the African slaves, there is still a significant degree of syncretism. Today the religion practiced in Mexico is as *mestizo* (mixed race) as its people, and this blend is integral to Mexican identity.

B. RELIGIOUS SYNCRETISM IN THE NARCO-CULTURA

Through the narco-cultura, millions of Mexicans have encountered the world of the narco—a world of violent death, affluence, power, and corruption at the highest levels

²⁶⁸ Ibid., 113–14.

²⁶⁹ Herbert J. Spinden, *Ancient Civilizations of Mexico and Central America*, (New York: American Museum of Natural History, 2011), 41.

²⁷⁰ Marco A. Gómez Pérez and José a. Delgado Solís, *Ritos y Mitos de la Muerte en México y Otras Culturas* [Rites and Myths of Death in Mexico and Other Cultures], (Federal District: Mexico: Grupo Editorial Tomo, 2000), 10.

of government; a world with its own organization, morals, and values. Narcos profess a strong popular religiosity, whether towards certain traditional saints of the Catholic Church or others who sanctified by the people alone, such as Malverde, Santa Muerte, and Juan Soldado. Narco-saints are “informal employers” of illegal trade in Mexico, including money laundering, smuggling, and drug trafficking.²⁷¹ The narco-saints “help” the poor and offer an easy self-defined righteousness consistent with popular lore, as folk saints with criminal records.²⁷² The narco-saints intervene as the link between pious conceits and a drug-riddled sociopolitical reality. As outlaw demigods, they are sympathetic with the “imperfect” human plight of the narco and offer to protect and motivate in the constant face of death.

1. La Santa Muerte: Mexico’s Idol, Symbol, and Social Force and Aspects

The cult of *La Santa Muerte* (Holy Death) can be traced to pre-Colombian²⁷³ cults celebrating the god of death, in which making sacrifices of animals and humans were made in exchange for blessing and the granting of petitions.²⁷⁴ Death is still venerated through the narco-saint La Santa Muerte, and offerings are made in the form of cigars, candles, and drugs. Santa Muerte is depicted with a scythe in one hand (see Figure 7); it is believed that the soul’s bond with the body hangs by a silver thread, which La Santa Muerte has authority to sever.²⁷⁵ In her other hand is a globe, representing her universal domain. She is represented as a skull, to symbolize death, and dressed in different colors, depending on the petition desired. When she is dressed in yellow, the devotee begs for money. Blue is for health, studies, and truth; green, for protection from the law; white, for accomplishment of good deeds; and black, for black magic or to inflict

²⁷¹ Howard Campbell, *Drug War Zone: Frontline Dispatches from the Streets of El Paso and Juárez*, (Austin, Texas: University of Texas Press, 2010), 9–10.

²⁷² Kail, *Narco-Cults*, 15.

²⁷³ Jorge Luis Zarazua Campa, *La Santa Muerte, El Mal de Ojo y otras Supersticiones* [The Holy Death, the Evil Eye and other Superstitions], (Federal District, Mexico: Ediciones Apóstoles de la palabra, 2005), 25.

²⁷⁴ Andrew Chesnut, *Devoted to Death: Santa Muerte, the Skeleton Saint*. (Oxford University Press, 2012), 18.

²⁷⁵ Kail, *Narco-Cults*, 53.

evil.²⁷⁶ The followers of La Santa Muerte seem to be increasing, perhaps because she grants petitions regardless of moral or ethical merit. As Martín quotes a resident of Mexico City,

Santa Muerte hears prayers from dark places. She was sent to rescue the lost, society's rejects. She understands us, she is a *cabrona* like us We are hard people and we live hard lives. But she accepts us all, when we do good and bad.²⁷⁷

Figure 7. A Statue of La Santa Muerte



Source: “Un Católico no puede dar Culto a la “Santa Muerte,” Alertan Expertos en México [A Catholic Cannot Worship the ‘Holy Death,’ Say Experts in Mexico],” ACIPRENSA, 18 August 15, <https://www.aciprensa.com/noticias/un-catolico-no-puede-dar-culto-a-la-santa-muerte-alertan-expertos-en-mexico-33952/>.

The Church condemns of the sins of the narco, and the government, which has lost credibility and legitimacy, sees the deity as demonic.²⁷⁸ But people like to believe in something strong that can solve their problems—and since no one defeats death, La Señora has power, and Mexicans rely on her. To her devotees, the Bony Lady, as she is affectionately called, is able to appear physically and manifest or print her images in

²⁷⁶ Chesnut, *Devoted to Death*, 211–218.

²⁷⁷ Martín, *Borderlands Saints*, 52.

²⁷⁸ Martín, *Borderlands Saints*, 54.

books and magazines.²⁷⁹ Her cult is confirmed by testimonies of miraculous intervention in dangers, health issues, and intractable problems.²⁸⁰ While death is neither a person, nor a thing, nor a force, no one can escape its grasp.

Some peoples of Mesoamerica had a custom of filling decorated boxes with sacred objects for placement on simple altars in which their ancestors' remains were preserved. These ancestors were worshiped in the same way that cultic deities are today. For more than three thousand years, Mexican civilization has maintained a close, even reverent, attitude towards death. The aborigines of Mexican understood the cessation of life as something that happens naturally to all living beings, as sequential as the night that follows day, the winter after autumn, and old age that succeeds youth. Life and death gradually became personified as were half-skeletal, half-fleshly figures, symbolizing the dual reality of mortal man, with life in death and death in life. At this point, a cult to death arose and spread to every corner of ancient Mexico. Its devotees came from many cultures, including the Maya and Zapotec, but the civilization in which the cult took greatest force was that of the Aztecs, which went to extremes of devotional practice.

Two of the ancient gods of the Aztecs, Mictlantecuhtli and Mictecacihuatl, were *el señor* and *la señora* (respectively) of the land of the dead, known as Mictlán. In this place were men and women who died of natural causes, but the road to the other side (death) was not easy.²⁸¹ Before appearing before the lord and lady, the deceased had to pass through many obstacles, such as a path of colliding rocks, deserts, hills, Xochitontl the great crocodile, and a rushing river crossed with the help of techichi, a dog sacrificed to accompany the dead.²⁸² Finally, the soul arrived in the presence of the terrible lords of death, to whom were given offerings.²⁸³ This detail is very important—the tradition of

²⁷⁹ Ibid., 56.

²⁸⁰ Ibid., 63–4.

²⁸¹ Michael E. Smith, Jennifer B. Wharton, and Jan Marie Olson. “Aztec Feasts, Rituals and Markets,” in *Archaeology and Politics of Food and Feasting in Early States and Empires*, ed. Tamara L Bray (New York: Kluwer Academic/Plenum Publishing, 2005), 245.

²⁸² Lucien Biart. *The Aztecs: Their History, Manners, and Customs*. (Illinois, Chicago: A. C. McClurg and Company, 2008), 205.

²⁸³ Carlos Montenegro, *Mexican Spiritualism, Spells & Rituals*, (Raleigh, NC: Lulu.com, 2012), 13.

offerings persists today at the altars of Holy Death. The lord and lady were not only the deities to whom the dead were entrusted; they were invoked by anyone who wanted the power of death.²⁸⁴ Their temple was in the ceremonial center of the ancient city of Mexico, Tenochtitlan, a small island in Lake Tlalxico (“navel of the earth”), in the Valley of Mexico.²⁸⁵ Other features of the Aztec death cult include *tzompantli*, “rows of heads,” or racks on which skulls were strung on sticks, occasionally to be used as abacuses by children.²⁸⁶ The *tzompantlis* in the great temples of ancient Mexico were an important part of the cult for priests and ordinary people.²⁸⁷ In addition to the *tzompantlis* were representations of death in the form in skulls carved in wood, stone, gold, bronze, or mud.²⁸⁸ Human skulls were adorned with flints and shells for eyes. Everywhere that traces of fleshless death appeared were the ornaments of the goddess *Coatlicue* (“skirt of vipers”), to whom offerings were made in rituals and idols produced of all types and sizes.²⁸⁹

The Spanish managed to suppress the cult of death but were unable to eradicate it. It was latent until the nineteenth century, when a resurgence occurred.²⁹⁰ At the beginning of the twentieth century, Catholics and others began to burn images of La Muerte, mainly in Central- and South America, to end the cult.²⁹¹ One of the images is believed to have survived the destruction: a wooden skeleton, found in Chiapas, which has its own temple. In 1965, the contemporary cult of Santa Muerte appeared in Hidalgo and took root in many Mexican states.²⁹² Devotion to Santa Muerte has reached a popularity comparable with the veneration of the Holy Virgin of Guadalupe.

²⁸⁴ Oscar Barrera Sánchez, *De Mictlantecuhtli a la Santa Muerte*, (Saarbrücken, Alemania: Editorial Académica Española, 2011), 18.

²⁸⁵ Biart. *The Aztecs: Their History, Manners, and Customs*, 145.

²⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 175.

²⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 147, 175.

²⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 322.

²⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 135–166.

²⁹⁰ Montenegro, *Mexican Spiritualism, Spells & Rituals*, 14.

²⁹¹ *Ibid.*

²⁹² Montenegro, *Mexican Spiritualism, Spells & Rituals*, 14.

The day of veneration of La Santa Muerte is held among the narco-cultura on 2 November, declared the “Day of Holy Death” by devotees.²⁹³ Although the Catholic Church condemns this holiday strongly, many nevertheless believe the day is observed in the Church calendar, doubtless from confusion with the orthodox celebrations of All Saint’s Day on November 1 and All Soul’s Day on November 2. Meanwhile, followers seem indifferent to the clashes between the Church and the cult of La Santa Muerte. Rituals similar to those in the Catholic Church are enacted for the narco-saint, including processions and petitions. Many build an altar to the narco-saint in their homes, offices, or businesses, usually consisting of a statue surrounded by offerings such as flowers, fruit, incense, wine, money, candy, and candles whose color varies according to the petition requested.²⁹⁴ People of all social classes go to her for miracles and favors in all areas of life.²⁹⁵ She accepts requests with malicious intentions, such as revenge and the death of rivals, since she is death itself. Some of her devotees wear a scapular with her image, while others acquire a tattoo.²⁹⁶ An indispensable element of the cult is the lighting of cigars and eating of bread, an obvious borrowing from the Catholic Mass, which “sanctifies” it in their minds and hearts as good and makes La Santa Muerte holy.

Santa Muerte’s devotion was common among criminals of all kind, who often made petition to the narco-saint for super-natural protection and to get away with their activities. Yet her devotees are not always criminal—they include anyone who needs protection from guns and bullets, such as military and police personnel. Devotion to Santa Muerte has become popular among the political and business elite.²⁹⁷ Those who come to her altar venerate her as if she were a canonical saint, making the sign of the cross and praying that their requests be granted. Attachment to this cult has spread to the United States along with her devotees, who protect their journeys by placing an image of the narco-saint in their luggage.

²⁹³ Ibid., 11.

²⁹⁴ Ibid., 25–26.

²⁹⁵ Ibid., 17.

²⁹⁶ Ibid., 15.

²⁹⁷ Tomás Prower, *La Santa Muerte: Unearthing the Magic & Mysticism of Death*, (Woodbury, MN: Llewellyn Worldwide, 2015), 36.

Devotees believe that the narco-saint prefers not to be called by her name, but rather by “La Comadre” (the midwife), “La Bonita” (pretty one) “La Flaca” (skinny one), “La Señora” (the lady), or “La Niña” (the girl). She is often sculpted as a skeletal body wrapped in an elegant tunic, who receives offerings like jewelry and even wedding dresses, for those hoping to obtain a husband. Every aspect of her image has special meaning. The robe that covers her head to toe is simple, but, as Montenegro notes, fraught with meaning as to color.²⁹⁸ The robe is the cover under which her true appearance is hidden; and just as it covers the skeleton of “the Lady,” so also the clothes and flesh of her devotees hide, in occult fashion, what is inside their souls and hearts. What gives them away as humans is their attempt to disguise their internal sins. Every beautiful face has skin and color, but underneath the skin is a skull just like that of one’s neighbor or most hated enemy. Likewise, the robe of La Señora covers or disguises that which she hides: the destiny that all her devotees carry. In most of the images of La Santa Muerte, she is wearing white, meaning that her devotees are looking for something good.²⁹⁹ But her scythe represents the merciless justice of a being who rules and governs the life of all, and everything eventually falls under the scythe, a tool that knows no distinctions. The globe in her left hand means that La Santa Muerte has no borders and her presence is everywhere on earth; she makes no distinctions—all will die. Thus, La Santa Muerte is a perverse promise of equality, justice, impartiality, and divine foreknowledge and will. She metes out life on earth and maintains a cycle wherein death is just a change.³⁰⁰

The cult of La Santa Muerte is complex and confusing, because this deity expresses many sectors excluded by society, as in the case of the narcos. Increasingly in recent years, devotion to La Señora has yielded centers of worship, shrines, and temples (see Figure 8) and created high consumption of items such as icons, candles, and religious paraphernalia for use in rituals. Images of La Santa Muerte are found in the

²⁹⁸ Montenegro, *Mexican Spiritualism, Spells & Rituals*, 18–21.

²⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 23.

³⁰⁰ Steve Gordon and Irene Kacandes, *Let's Talk About Death: Asking the Questions that Profoundly Change the Way We Live and Die* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2015), 222-233.

same stores where official Catholic saints are found, suggesting the extent to which the cult is a contender and alternative to Catholicism.

Figure 8. Santa Muerte Shrine I, Tultitlan, Mexico



Source: “Santa Muerte Shrine, Tultitlan, Mexico,” *Morbid Anatomy*, 9 November 2014, <http://morbidanatomy.blogspot.com/2014/11/santa-muerte-shrine-tultitlan-mexico.html>.

The poor constitute the social base of the cult—those estranged from the benefits of security, justice under the law, and education. But both narcos and the powerful are important constituents. Ordinary people ask favors or miracles to land a job, enjoy good health, or buy food, while people with economic, political, or criminal power ask for revenge or the death to the enemy.³⁰¹ Those who live at the margins of the law exert great influence over the symbolic dimension of the deity. It is not only the socially outcast sectors, but also socially emerging actors who experience social exclusion. Devotion to La Santa Muerte gives religious support to the criminal activities of persons in pariah

³⁰¹ Chesnut, *Devoted to Death: Santa Muerte*, 20–156.

sectors, who in turn use the cult to create their own codes and symbols that justify and legitimize their actions. Those at the edge of the law are typically neither very religious nor atheistic, participating for their own reasons in a belief system propagated through the narco-cultura, creating their own religious agendas to support their self-image, reputation, and criminal intentions. The narcos have embraced La Santa Muerte as highly consistent with their lives, in which death is a constant presence. Narcos are aware that at any moment, they may die—death is an everyday experience in their lifestyle, and their renegade piety expresses their outlaw experience. The growing cult of La Santa Muerte is abetted by a government unable to combat drug trafficking and sustain Mexican society. Significantly, in mid-2004, on the border road of Anahuac, Nuevo Laredo, Tamaulipas—a route widely used by narcos—a small chapel dedicated to the Virgin of Guadalupe was set afire and partially destroyed. Meanwhile, a shrine to La Santa Muerte, Jesus Malverde, and Juan Soldado, and a statue of the Lady a meter high were erected. The narcos bring them marijuana joints as an offering. Here the violent new cults are pushing out the old.

2. Juan Soldado

The legend of Juan Soldado brings fame to the community of Tijuana, Mexico; people want to hear tales about Juan Soldado and gain insider knowledge as to the false characterization of this man and how it resulted in his popular elevation as a narco-saint worshiped in the chapels of the municipal cemetery and thousands of homes in Tijuana and beyond. The Juan Soldado legend has made a mark in history, yet only a few can relay an objective account of what happened in February 1938 to make him a spirit from whom many expect a miracle. Juan Soldado is rejected by the Church as unworthy of sainthood, but in Mexico, the people believe in him.

a. Historical Context

Mexicans emigrating to the United States since the mid-nineteenth century have sought supernatural aid to cross the border illegally, smuggle drugs, find jobs, and support their families. From this reality, an unprecedented supernatural protector was

created: Juan Soldado, who in life was a confessed murderer and rapist.³⁰² Soldado is the patron of narcos, good health, family problems, and border crossings. The route to the United States is full of challenges and dangers, especially since the advent of the narco-cultura. Every migrant passing Tijuana has heard of Juan *Soldado* (the soldier) and may invoke him for economic opportunities and protection.³⁰³ Many migrants petition Juan Soldado for help in obtaining a visa to enter the United States as a tourist, with the possibility of staying. Other devotees pray for their children's safe journey to and from the land of their dreams—in particular, that they not fall into drug addiction or the webs of the narco-cultura.

Juan Soldado's name was Juan Castillo Morales, born in a small town in Oaxaca.³⁰⁴ He was executed on 17 February, 1938, by firing squad for allegedly killing and raping an eight-year-old girl in Tijuana, about six months before.³⁰⁵ He reportedly admitted under interrogation that he committed the crime, but the legend does not match known events, nor was the autopsy performed by a qualified medical examiner. Post-mortem examination revealed she was killed first and then raped;³⁰⁶ Juan claimed to have raped and then killed her by a blow to the head with a brick, afterwards cutting her throat with glass found at the scene.³⁰⁷ During his trial, witnesses declared that he often propositioned very young girls. The legend says there were two attempted mutinies to lynch Juan, each mutiny was of over a thousand people in a town with a population of about nineteen thousand at the time.³⁰⁸ The government planned to take him to a prison outside the city to protect him, but were unable to transfer him due to the mob.³⁰⁹ Juan's fate was sealed when in his court martial, his ex-girlfriend testified he had once

³⁰² Vanderwood, *Juan Soldado*, 14.

³⁰³ *Ibid.*, 91.

³⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, xi.

³⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 338.

³⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 50.

³⁰⁷ Vanderwood, *Juan Soldado*, 13.

³⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 28.

³⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 20.

propositioned her niece.³¹⁰ She allegedly testified that the young soldier used marijuana, was constantly drunk, that the day of the crime he had blood on his hands and clothes, and that when asked about what happened, he replied that he had quarreled with someone. Yet in official documents, his name does not appear and it is not been verified that she denounced the young man on trial.

The first time Juan was questioned, he denied being guilty; but questioned again, he covered his head with his hands, bent down, and sobbingly admitted his guilt. He confessed that when the girl left a store, he hit her head with a stone³¹¹ then carried her to a nearby barn and raped her, afterwards taking her to a garage and cutting her neck with broken glass. While in jail, he was afraid and asked for protection from the mob, which was infuriated when the newspapers revealed what he had done. The people swarmed the city jail to take justice into their own hands. In the unusual circumstances and seriousness of the situation, the military authorities did not want it thought that they were protecting Juan, let alone helping him evade his fate. They therefore did something unusual for the time by inviting the international press to interrogate the prisoner in his cell. During the interview, Juan confessed to rape and murder. Published accounts state that Juan was unapologetic and not overwhelmed by his situation. The Mexican press did not send a reporter, but one from the *Los Angeles Examiner*, an American newspaper, wrote that Juan assumed an unusual expression, smiling and saying, “Yes, I did it, but I did not do anything to the girl when she was dead.”³¹² Juan always denied the results provided by the medical examiner, who found that she was raped after death, claiming that he did it while the girl was still alive. Juan also confessed to the reporter that he had done something similar before, and his exact words were published.³¹³

In 1929, the year ending the Cristero war (the last armed struggle of religious importance after the Mexican Revolution), Mexico abolished the death penalty. At that time, Tijuana was a territory, because the population was too small to be considered a

³¹⁰ Ibid., 13.

³¹¹ Ibid.

³¹² Vanderwood, *Juan Soldado*, 14, 29.

³¹³ Ibid., 57.

state; however, the elimination of the death penalty applied to Mexico's territories as well.³¹⁴ At the time of Juan Soldado's trial, General Manuel Contreras was in charge of protecting the city and had under his command about 600 soldiers and an unspecified number of police officers, border agents, and citizen volunteers, as needed. With the recent termination of the Cristero war, it was common to recruit *agraristas*, poor farmers, to serve as deputies in payment for lands the government had given them after the war.³¹⁵ When the enraged mob targeted the government palace to burn it down and intimidate the government, General Contreras responded sternly.

In a second uprising, the mob burned a military headquarters called "*El Fuerte*" (the fort), resulting in a strong response from Mexican authorities.³¹⁶ The next day, newspapers reported that the uprising killed twelve and injured hundreds, while others published only a narrative. Vanderwood notes that, contrary to these reports, the governor of the territory, Colonel Sanchez Taboada, informed the ministry of the interior that there were no dead and only six were injured in the uprising, which lasted the entire night of 14 February 1938. The governor informed the ministry that a soldier had killed a young girl and was incarcerated³¹⁷ and that troops had been sent to the city to maintain order, because a worker's union, the Revolutionary Confederation of Mexican Workers (CROM) had fueled the uprising to pressure the federal government to close prostitution saloons and casinos. It was a story hard to believe, because the governor himself owned many of these establishments and used his position to keep them open. President Cardenas had enacted reforms that enforced the closure of these businesses, but encountered resistance from the governors.³¹⁸

Juan was tried by court martial on 16 February 1938 at 5 p.m. at the headquarters of General Contreras.³¹⁹ It is impossible to obtain details about the proceedings because

³¹⁴ Ibid., 46.

³¹⁵ Ibid., 31.

³¹⁶ Ibid., 34.

³¹⁷ Ibid., 29.

³¹⁸ José Rivera, Gabriel y Saldaña, José, "Religiosidad popular en Tijuana. El culto a Juan Soldado," *Calafia* 10, no. 5 (2000): 14–24.

³¹⁹ Vanderwood, *Juan Soldado*, 42.

the records have disappeared; however, the verdict was made public.³²⁰ The absence of written proceedings suggests haste—that the government ordered the maximum penalty and rapid implementation to avoid riots. The court martial lasted until the dawn of 17 February 1938. The sentence was death by execution, allegedly—there was never written proof of it. The government wanted the execution carried out in public, and the municipal cemetery was prepared. Juan’s defense attorney, Luis Martinez, could have requested a presidential pardon to gain time, although denial would have been likely. Once requested, a review would have been required, which would have lasted a year and required transfer of the prisoner to a safe location. After a year, a life sentence might have been negotiated; but this legal option was never explored. After the court martial, the authorities invited the press to witness the execution and informed them the sentence was to be conducted under *ley fuga*, a type of execution during a simulated escape of a detainee.³²¹ by daylight, so in the press could take clear pictures. It is believed that Juan had to die to placate the mob, and therefore the death penalty was enacted publicly.³²²

On 18 February 1938, the *Los Angeles Examiner* chronicled Juan’s death. The article stated Juan always kept his smile, just as when he was questioned, and claimed he was frightened and did not want to escape. When they reached the place of execution, Juan did not want to get off the vehicle and the soldiers poked him with their bayonets. Once off the vehicle, Juan asked for a cigarette and began to smoke, then turned around and started to run, jumping a small barbed-wire fence as the order to open fire was given.³²³ Juan fell and rose stumbling when the second shower of bullets reached him, which caused him to fall face down. After a third volley, he moved no more. The officer in charge approached and fired a *coup de grâce* into his forehead. The crowd of several hundred who witnessed the event stood immobile in suspense as a doctor declared him dead.³²⁴ The soldiers buried him where he lay, without Christian ceremony, as, inexplicably, a priest had not been provided. The newspaper mentioned that Juan never

³²⁰ Ibid.

³²¹ Ibid., 46.

³²² Ibid., 45.

³²³ Vanderwood, *Juan Soldado*, 179.

³²⁴ Ibid., 50.

received a formal sentence, as was warranted. Legend says that as Juan ran, he waved to a child to shoo him to safety and that he was buried about twenty meters from the grave of Olga Camacho, his victim just few months before.³²⁵ The legend also insists that several soldiers misfired on purpose so as not to hit the target. But according to Vanderwood, authorities contradicted all this, denying that there was a carrying out of ley fuga, and that Juan was a farmer, not a soldier.³²⁶

b. The Legendary Protector of Migrants

The day of Juan's death was the beginning of his cult, with the appearance of flowers, candles, and stones on the spot where he fell. People still pray, ask favors, and attribute to him miracles of the most diverse nature. One of his commonly attributed miracles is the special protection of migrants and drug smugglers crossing the border. There is a tradition of piling rocks where someone died to indicate the number of petitions made known to Juan Soldado; when the heap grows large, it is moved to start a new pile.³²⁷ It is believed that most people who visit Municipal Cemetery Number 1 in Tijuana go to visit the tomb of Juan Soldado and make their petitions known (see Figure 9).³²⁸

The editor of a Tijuana newspaper, Antonio Morales Tamborrel, wrote an article a few days after the execution entitled, "*Había muerto un inocente clamando justicia*" (An innocent calling for justice has died), stating that Juan Soldado was killed because he was a strong critic of the government—the real cause of death.³²⁹ Statements like this, written from rumors that spread throughout the countryside and ignored the circumstances of Juan's life and death, shaped the creation of a new popular saint.

³²⁵ Ibid.

³²⁶ Ibid., 53.

³²⁷ Ibid., 175.

³²⁸ Ibid., 77.

³²⁹ Vanderwood, *Juan Soldado*, 62.

Figure 9. Shrine of Juan Soldado at Municipal Cemetery 1, Tijuana



Source: “El Santuario de “Juan Soldado” (Patrono de los Migrantes) en el Día de Muertos,” InvestigadorSocial, 27 December 2013, <http://investigadorasocial.blogspot.com/2013/12/el-santuario-de-juan-soldado-patrono-de.html>.

The strange case of Juan Soldado is an instance of an instant elevation to narco-sainthood. Today, Juan Soldado is considered an *anima* (spirit), and his prayer is known as *La Magnifica* (the magnificent, Figure 10),³³⁰ in queasy echo of the Virgin Mary’s hymn of praise, *The Magnificat*.

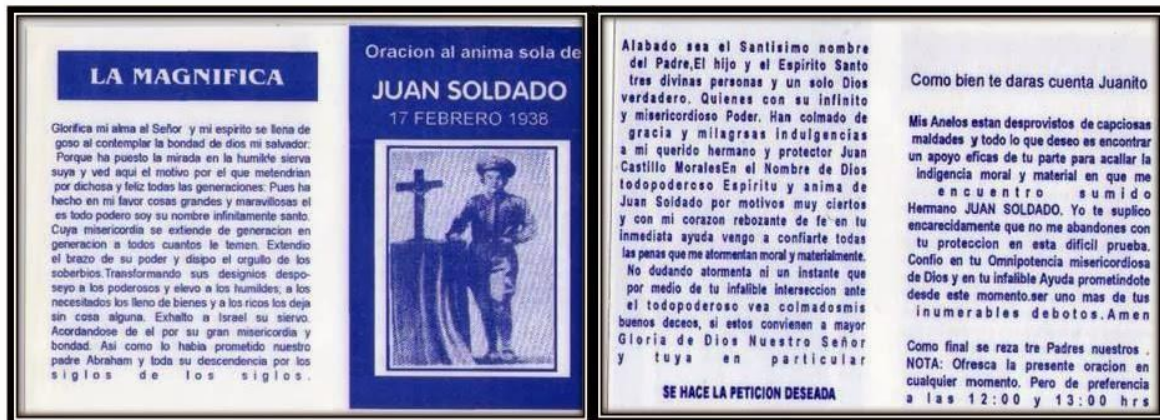
Devotion to the rapist and murderer grew slowly through the years. Those who gave eyewitness accounts to local newspapers claimed that there were no signs of joy among the crowd at his execution, as might be expected from people who days before had wanted to lynch him; rather, they claimed to have observed sadness, and even mercy.³³¹ Devotional activity began early, with people bringing flowers to his grave, and many at the time were supportive of him (see Figure 11). It was considered striking how quickly social rage had been replaced with a sense of compassion. As newspapers reported on the alleged illegal application of *ley fuga*, they called openly for support for

³³⁰ Ibid., 194.

³³¹ Colegio de la Frontera Norte, *Entre la Magia y la Historia: Tradiciones, Mitos y Leyendas de la Frontera*, (Tijuana, Mexico: Plaza y Valdes, 2000), 93–95.

the “innocent” who had died while “calling for justice.”³³² But it was impossible to consider innocent a confessed murderer and there is no extant eyewitness version of events that states he “*clamó por justicia*” (cried for justice).³³³

Figure 10. Prayer to Juan Soldado: La Magnifica (The Magnificent)



Source: “El Santuario de “Juan Soldado” (Patrono de los Migrantes) en el Día de Muertos,” InvestigadorSocial, 27 December 2013, <http://investigadorasocial.blogspot.com/2013/12/el-santuario-de-juan-soldado-patrono-de.html>.

In Mexico, this is how social heroes are constructed. Not far from Tijuana, in the neighboring state of Sinaloa, the figure of another supernatural protector, Jesus Malverde, was created and, as with Juan Soldado, his contemporary support comes overwhelmingly from the drug cartels. It was not until the development of the narco-cultura that Juan found new devotees. The veneration of Juan Soldado, like that of Jesus Malverde, initially involved petitions for supernatural intervention and successful border crossing.³³⁴ Tijuana is one of the most important cities in Mexico, due to its large population and location as one of the biggest illegal border crossings in the world. One aspect of narco popular religiosity that cannot be overstated is that the vast majority of devotees are illegal immigrants. They are for the most part defenseless in an unfamiliar environment, grateful for a deity that protects them in crime. These devotees are not

³³² Vanderwood, *Juan Soldado*, 67.

³³³ Ibid.

³³⁴ Vanderwood, *Juan Soldado*, 214.

interested in investigating the backstory of those from whom they receive supernatural protection, and the vast majority do not know the origins of Juan Soldado. But his cult endures, with flowers still laid on his tomb after seventy-five years.

Figure 11. Inside Juan Soldado's Shrine



Source: “El Santuario de “Juan Soldado” (Patrono de los Migrantes) en el Día de Muertos,” InvestigadorSocial, 27 December 2013, <http://investigadorasocial.blogspot.com/2013/12/el-santuario-de-juan-soldado-patrono-de.html>.

C. CONCLUSION

In the narco-cultura, stories of real or invented people and events are potential fodder for cultic worship, and hard criminals may be apotheosized into supernatural protectors. The narcos live in a morally disoriented universe that promotes persecution, theft, extortion, rape, addiction, and death. The narco feels has no recourse but the support of morally indifferent spiritual friends he has known since childhood. The elevation of Santa Muerte and Juan Soldado reveals a great paradox of popular religion in Mexico: while La Santa Muerte has become the beloved avatar of death, Juan Soldado, a rapist and murderer, is the foe of death and guarantor of life. By this is seen the limitless

capacity and flexibility of popular religion, in contrast to the straight and narrow gate and one Shepherd of the Catholic faith.

The formation of new narco-saints is fed by rumors, superstition, legends (preferably of some longevity), and felt needs. The hopes of desperate men and women are easily carried away as tales of miracles and supernatural favor are relayed without investigation or corroboration. Facts and history are of no consequence—only relief, and surviving the day. For this terrible spiritual need, the narco-cultura offers dark angels and demonic beneficence.

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