



A young Tijuana man shows his tattoo of La Santa Muerte.
Photo from Associated Press.

The Narcovirus

by Alma Guillermoprieto

At dawn on September 13, twenty-four male bodies were found in La Marquesa National Park, just outside Mexico City limits. They had been kidnapped the previous night in the neighboring state of Michoacán and transported to La Marquesa, where they were executed.

On the evening of September 15, as Mexicans were celebrating their independence from Spain, suspected traffickers lobbed three hand grenades into a festive crowd in Morelia's central plaza, killing eight people and wounding many others.

On January 25, in the state of Baja California, the army captured Santiago Meza López. He had been paid \$600 a week to dispose of those killed on his employer's orders. Mesa confessed that he had dismembered over 300 people and eliminated any trace of them by dissolving their body parts in vats of acid.

On February 15, just off Mexico's Pacific coastline, a handmade, semi-submersible vessel carrying several tons of cocaine, one of dozens estimated to leave the Pacific coast of Colombia every year, was captured by the Mexican Coast Guard.

On that same day, in Mexico City, not far at all from where I live, two women were found dead in a car. Their bodies were in the trunk; their heads had been placed in coolers on the front seat.

Three weeks later, bodyguards for the governor of Baja California were arrested at a *narcofiesta*, along with some 25 members of an "extermination group" headed by Guatemalan assassins in league with traffickers from the state of Sinaloa.

How did this happen? How did Mexico come to this? Briefly, I hope to explain that the bloodshed and corruption now afflicting the country are the highly predictable result of the war on drugs and that the men who murder each other in the atrocious ways now grabbing headlines all over the world are strengthened and emboldened in their task by something we can call the *narcocultura*.

Coca leaves are neither toxic nor narcotic. In Bolivia and Peru, coca cultivation is traditional and legal. The crushed leaves are sold in tea bags in supermarkets and are very helpful for babies' colic or grown-ups' headaches. It is only when a roomful of coca leaves is crushed and processed with

precursor chemicals — ether, kerosene or acetone — that a kilo of cocaine is produced.

Cocaine was initially developed as an anti-depressive in Europe; it was praised and prescribed by Sigmund Freud and legally manufactured in Europe and the United States. As its addictive properties became evident, therapeutic use was discontinued, and cocaine was declared illegal in the United States in 1914. But the market for the drug was already well established, and Richard Nixon's declaration of war on this internationally traded commodity merely increased its desirability.

By the late 1970s, Colombian traffickers were importing coca paste from Bolivia and processing it into ready-for-export cocaine in laboratories hidden in the sub-Amazonian jungle. After the U.S. government pushed Bolivia to crack down on its drug trade, illegal coca cultivation and cocaine manufacture spread to Peru, then — after pressure was exerted on Peruvian growers and exporters — to Colombia. From Colombia, the trade spread to Brazil and then on to Venezuela and back again to Bolivia and Peru. Early on, Colombian drug traders expanded their trafficking networks into the Caribbean — to Haiti and very probably to Cuba — and into Central America and southern Mexico. Recently, the drug trade has started operating out of Africa, where the consequences will certainly be devastating.

Following the death of Colombian drug trader Pablo Escobar in 1993, the cocaine trade in Colombia fragmented. Although coca is still being grown in the Andes and continues to be processed largely in the Colombian sub-Amazon basin, control of the U.S. market has increasingly devolved into Mexican hands. Two-thirds of all the illegal drugs consumed in the United States enter the country from Mexico. (It is often forgotten, however, that the greater part of Mexican drug-smugglers profits still come from their export of home-grown marijuana.)

Upon taking power in December 2006, President Felipe Calderón made the fateful decision to deploy the Mexican army in those states where the drug cartels operate with almost complete impunity. How successful Calderón's anti-narcotic military offensive will be is impossible to predict, but we can learn some lessons, at least, from the last great military offensive against traffickers, which took place back in the 1970s when much of the business was concentrated

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Drug trafficking routes and cartel territories.

on Mexico's Pacific Coast, in the marijuana-growing state of Sinaloa. A great many low- and mid-level traffickers were killed or arrested then. A great many military commanders and troops reached profitable agreements with the traders. And most of the truly powerful operators fled Sinaloa to restart their business in other states — Jalisco, Michoacán, Baja California and Chihuahua — where they continue to prosper to this day.

The Arellano Félix brothers set up operations in Tijuana. The Carrillo Fuentes family settled in Ciudad Juárez. A man called Joaquín Guzmán Loera (known as “*el chapo*” or “the short, stocky guy”) fled Sinaloa for Jalisco. After many epic adventures, including his escape in a laundry basket from a high-security prison, Chapo Guzmán resumed operations in his home state over a decade ago.

In the past, these three families had long-standing power and territory-sharing agreements, but the arrangements collapsed thanks to an aggressive upstart called Osiel Cárdenas Guillén. He was not from Sinaloa, and he emerged as the key trafficker in the Gulf Coast state of Tamaulipas in the early 1990s, shipping a large amount of illicit Colombian goods through the many busy crossing

points there. While Cárdenas has spent the last several years in Mexican and U.S. jails, his former bodyguards and henchmen have taken over his share of the market. It's worth noting that these Gulf Coast successors to the Cárdenas empire, who call themselves the Zetas, are former military anti-narcotics commandos, many of them trained in the United States.

Much of the current bloodshed is the result of a dispute between the Sinaloa, Gulf Coast and border point traffickers over how the territory is to be shared.

But the violence we are seeing is also the traffickers' response to Calderón's declared offensive against them. Today, more than 30,000 troops patrol a dozen states, including Michoacán, Sinaloa, Baja California (including, most importantly, the city of Tijuana), Chihuahua (where the city with the highest murder rate, Ciudad Juárez, is located) and Tamaulipas (with the key border cities of Reynosa and Nuevo Laredo). Throughout the country, government officials have been threatened or murdered, and even high-ranking officials — vice-ministers and army generals — are among the victims. And the army and security forces are once again in full contact with the corrupting power of drug money.

Of course, corruption among the military and police forces is nothing new: during the seven decades that a single party ruled Mexico, corruption was generally tolerated, even encouraged. Virtually every government institution, including the various law-enforcement agencies, was staffed at every level by men and women who could be bought off for a good price — indeed, who expected to be bought off by the citizenry.

This twisted relationship with power is perhaps the most insidious element in the fight against the drug trade, and it is a central element of the culture in which traffickers thrive. But I would like to talk about narcocultura in a narrower sense: the production of symbols, rituals and artifacts — slang, religious cults, music, consumer goods — that allow people involved in the drug trade to recognize themselves as part of a community, to establish a hierarchy in which the acts they are required to perform acquire positive value and to absorb the terror inherent in their line of work.

The aspect of narcocultura most familiar to people in the United States is the music known as the *narcocorrido*. The

form harks back to the epic narrative songs of the Middle Ages, which recounted the deeds and sorrows of heroes. Like all rural musical forms, the Mexican variant of the old epic songs was initially very simple. There was a guitar and a singer. However, because *corridos* took hold in the north of the country and because the north borders on the United States and because Texas had recently received an influx of German immigrants, accordions were incorporated early in the 20th century, modernizing the old-fashioned music. Still, the corrido would undoubtedly have faded away if it hadn't been for the Mexican Revolution, which was, in the truest sense, a heroic enterprise. Pancho Villa in particular, the great trickster hero of all time, was a man of the people and an epic warrior who inspired dozens of corridos.

By the 1960s, however, once the revolutionary myth was no longer a source of national identity or great national satisfaction, and when television had equipped a huge segment of the population with a cosmopolitan outlook, the corridos were becoming extinct. But their spirit transmigrated to a lively region on the Pacific coast, where the traditional music

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Pancho Villa (center), the original “trickster hero” of the traditional *corridos*.



Photo courtesy of the Library of Congress, Bain News Service Collection.



Photo from Getty Images.

Vicente Carrillo Leyva, heir to the notorious Juárez Cartel, was arrested by the Federal Police while jogging in Mexico City on April 1, 2009.

was played with a big guitar known as the *tololoche*, two little sticks called the *redoba* and a lot of brass, notably the tuba.

The region was Sinaloa, and one of the many groups playing corridos there in the mid-60s would soon emigrate to California and become the most famous Mexican musical group of all time, playing *norteño* music with corrido lyrics about the world they knew — the world of the marijuana growers and smugglers whose links to the powerful were so... powerful. They called themselves Los Tigres del Norte, and their first big hit told the story of Emilio Varela and Camelia la Tejana, who smuggled marijuana stuffed in the tires of their truck.

At some point, the new corrido singers understood that if, in true medieval style, they wrote a song flattering a real, living person of circumstance, they would benefit. Many examples of the genre can be found on YouTube. Quite a few extol the virtues of Chapo Guzmán, the most wanted Sinaloa trafficker: “He’s a friend of those who are friends, an enemy of those who are enemies,” the song goes, and (I paraphrase) he controls a great deal of territory and is an all-around good thing!

In a country where success is hard to come by, drug traffickers are more successful than virtually anyone. In a country where one must constantly observe the niceties of hierarchy, traffickers respect no rules, and they spend their money in the same reckless way they use up their lives. The

admiration born of these achievements makes other values acceptable. I offer, as an example, one last song from the narcoculture. It was written by Lupillo Rivera, who was born in Los Angeles but sings in Spanish for a primarily Mexican audience. A number of narcocorrido singers have been murdered in the last two or three years, but when all the other singers were running scared, Lupillo Rivera chose not to ease his way out of the genre. Instead, he came out last year with a record called “At a Private Party,” and the cover photograph very clearly gives one to understand that it was recorded in the *hacienda* or *rancho* of a drug lord or *jefe*. The first cut is called “The Boss Is Partying,” and the following is my literal translation of some of the lyrics:

The boss is partying, so we have to keep an eye on him. I remember that last time, when he started to drink, he took a very young girl with him when he left. The doors are now closed, so this party is going to last a long time. And... once he says, “Bottoms up,” and he’s done a few lines, there’s no telling when it will end. As usual, he has a visitor: it’s his friend, the colonel, who has brought the beauty queen he uses. It is a good idea to hide our own women, because you never know what they’ll get up to. We have to bring the jefe the best-looking women, and if he is bored with them, then we’ll bring him some that haven’t been used.

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Contrabando y Traición (Smuggling and Betrayal)

By Angel González Sung by: Los Tigres del Norte

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Salieron de San Isidro
Procedentes de Tijuana,
Traían las llantas del carro
Repletas de yerba mala.
Eran Emilio Varela
Y Camelia La Tejana.

Pasaron por San Clemente
Los paró la emigración,
Les pidió sus documentos,
Les dijo "De donde son?"
Ella era de San Antonio
Una hembra de corazón.

CHORUS 1:

Una hembra si quiere a un hombre
Por él puede dar la vida,
Pero hay que tener cuidado
Si esa hembra se siente herida,
La traición y el contrabando
Son cosas incompatibles.

A Los Ángeles llegaron
A Hollywood se pasaron
En un callejón oscuro
Las cuatro llantas cambiaron,
Ahí entregaron la yerba
Y ahí también les pagaron,

Emilio dice a Camelia:
"Hoy te das por despedida.
Con la parte que te toca
Tu puedes rehacer tu vida,
Yo me voy pa' San Francisco
Con la dueña de mi vida."

CHORUS 2:

Sonaron siete balazos
Camelia a Emilio mataba,
La policia solo halló
Una pistola tirada.
Del dinero y de Camelia
Nunca más se supo nada.

They left San Isidro
Coming from Tijuana,
Their car tires
Full of "bad grass" [marijuana].
They were Emilio Varela and
Camelia the Texan.

Passing through San Clemente,
They were stopped by Immigration.
He asked for their documents.
He said, "Where are you from?"
She was from San Antonio,
A woman with a lot of heart.

CHORUS 1:

If a woman loves a man,
She can give her life for him,
But watch out
If that woman feels wounded.
Betrayal and smuggling
Don't mix.

They arrived in Los Angeles,
To Hollywood they went.
In a dark alley,
They changed the four tires.
There they delivered the grass,
And there they were paid.

Emilio says to Camelia,
"Today is your farewell.
With your share,
You can make a new life.
I am going to San Francisco,
with the mistress of my life."

CHORUS 2:

Seven shots rang out
Camelia killed Emilio.
All the police found
Was the discarded pistol.
Of Camelia and the money,
Nothing more was ever known.

Photo: Hernán Hernández, bassist for Los Tigres.

Photo courtesy of the Universal Forum of Cultures, Monterrey 2007.

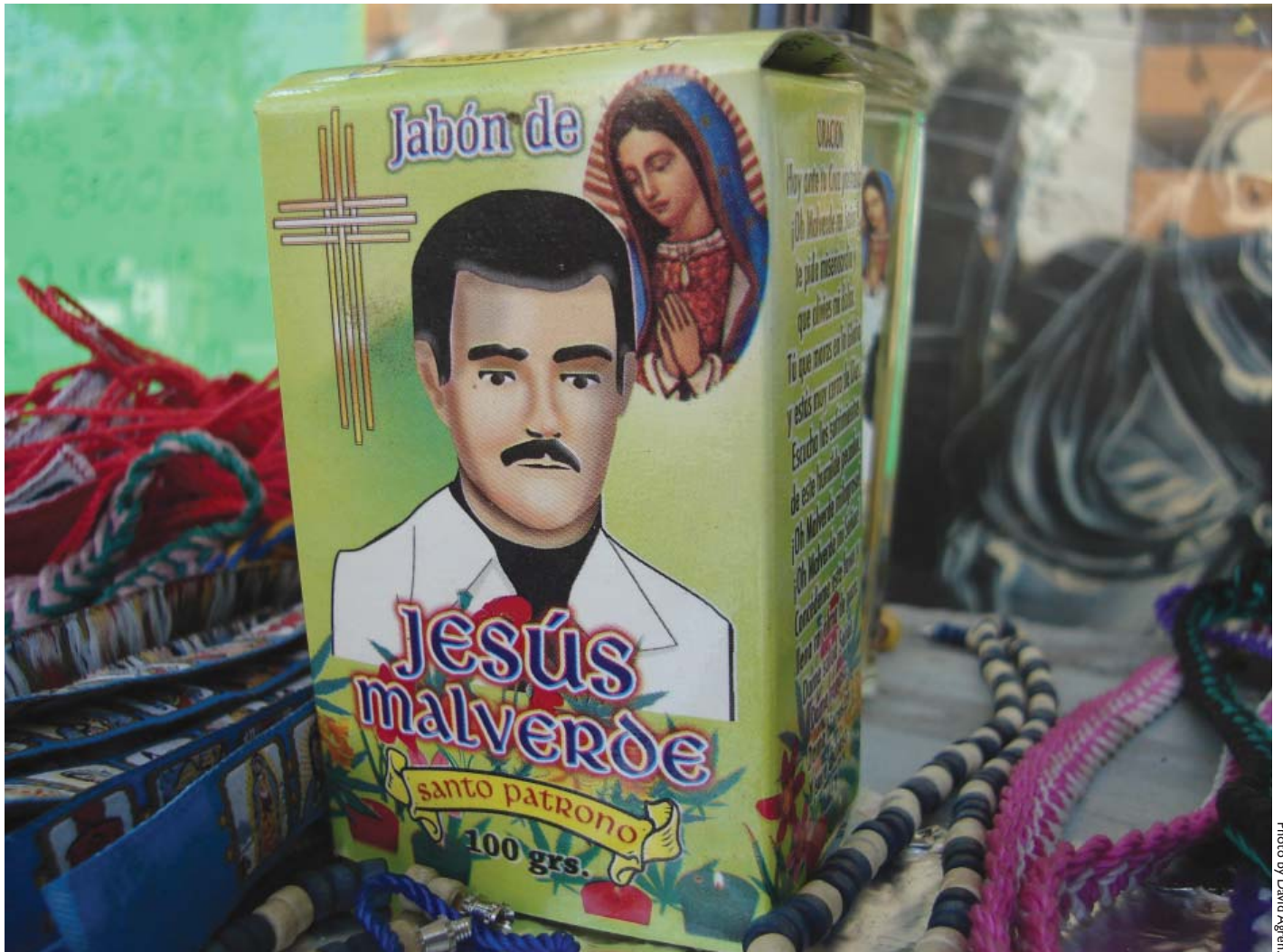


Photo by David Agren.

Jesús Malverde soap for sale at a Mexico City shrine to the unofficial saint.

The audience for these songs is vast. Most listeners are civilians, as it were, and will never get more involved in the trade than through the simple enjoyment of a song. But many are in the drug life, and they are back-country folks or young men from the urban slums. They learn to kill, and in the emptiness and absence of meaning that follows murder, they look desperately for redemption and for grounding. They find it in consumer goods — narcojeans, narcotennis shoes, narcocars — and in the new religions, the *narcocultos*.

The oldest and best-known is the cult of Jesús Malverde, patron saint of Chapo Guzmán and other Sinaloa traffickers, a Robin Hood figure who is supposed to have been active in the late 19th century. His first name is Jesús, and his last name is a compound word: *Mal-verde* or Bad-green. We know that in gangster talk “bad” frequently means “good” and that in Mexican slang “verde” can refer to both dollar bills and marijuana. There is no documentary evidence that Malverde ever existed, but hundreds of people worship every day at his shrine, which is directly across the street

from the Sinaloa government building. And it is reliably said that whenever Chapo Guzmán or another powerful trafficker needs to make an offering, the street is closed down to let him arrive and pray in peace. Jesús Malverde is deeply Mexican, from his legend (he is said to have made his first appearance to a mule-train driver) to his effigy, which is made of cheap ceramic and bears a certain resemblance to former President Vicente Fox.

The same cannot be said of La Santa Muerte, the Holy Death, Mexico’s newest and fastest-growing cult. The Santa is frequently associated with the Gulf Coast trafficking group — the Zetas — and with those who control the trade in downtown Mexico City. The image of the death figure worshipped in this new cult comes from medieval morality plays by way of Hollywood horror movies: the skeleton carries a globe in one hand and a scythe in the other, and its skull-face has no personality. La Santa Muerte is not related to the rituals of the Day of the Dead, in which Mexicans put up altars with images of their loved ones and honor them with their favorite music and food. The little skeletons used

to decorate the altar for this holiday are festively sinning figures, full of personality, used to remind us that life is fleeting — but fun.

The figure of the Holy Death is different: she works miracles for people in desperate need, including traffickers who may be oppressed by guilt or afraid for their lives. If you're in the business of death, you might pray for a way out of the terrible fix you've gotten yourself into, and failing that, you might pray for a good death; you might pray that your body won't be found in the trunk of a car and your head in a cooler on the front seat; you might pray that your throat won't be slit open and the tongue pulled down so that your corpse appears to be wearing a necktie. Given that you know life is going to be short, you might pray for a decent end.

The latest news, 26 months after President Felipe Calderón's declaration of war against the drug trade, is that 30 armed *narco*s, operating for the first time as a sort of paramilitary force, attacked a police barracks in central Mexico. This to me would indicate that treating a terrible health issue as if it were a war, and not a problem of injustice and societal dysfunction, eventually leads to real war. For years, U.S. anti-narcotics officials in Latin America, involved for too long in combating the drug trade, have said wearily that fighting drugs is like pinching a balloon: if you pinch drug production in Bolivia, it pops up in Peru; pinch drug production in Peru, and it will pop up again in Colombia. I would like to stress that this is an almost criminally inadequate comparison, one that completely ignores the damage done to our societies in the 40 years of the U.S. war on drugs.

What the drug trade is really like is the HIV virus: once it infects

the social body, it has devastating consequences, and there is no getting rid of it. Drug warriors may be able to bring down the level of drug trafficking for a few years, as the U.S. Drug Enforcement Agency did in Bolivia. But the policy of combating drug use through warfare leaves behind a society in which pervasive illegal networks and an endemic habit of violence — the larger definition of *narcocultura* — have been acquired. The drug war, as it was fought in the early 1970s, involved three Andean countries, Mexico, Afghanistan and

three countries in Southeast Asia. Forty years later, drugs are a scourge throughout the world. The war on drugs is not only a failed policy, it is a failed policy that has generated terrible and lasting damage. Only when we perceive and analyze the consequences can we start to figure out where to go from this disaster.

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Children being led across the street in Reynosa, Mexico.



Photo courtesy of <http://www.solo-opiniones.com/>.