**Abstract**

At first glance, present-day Mexico appears to have very little in common with Iran and Syria. The former is officially Catholic, and the latter is formally Islamic. Nevertheless, these dual beliefs expose perilous movements born in two societies in crises. The cult of Santa Muerte provides an identity for the crime-ridden underworld of Mexico which experiences deteriorating economy, shortage of necessities, and the desperation of a people looking to regain basic rights. Criminals conduct drug trafficking, human sacrifices, and homicide under the blessing of Santa Muerte. Similarly, ISIS (The Islamic State in Iraq and Syria) is a social construction that uses religion, in this case Islam, to justify violent deeds such as beheadings, crucifixions, and other forms of homicide. This paper will examine the visual culture associated with each movement to argue that both exploit violence under the endorsement of faith using similar tactics although under different historical circumstances. In this interdisciplinary study and semiotic evaluation of images, I will discuss how each utilizes culturally specific visual language to construct their identities through ceremonies, practices, iconography, and media coverage.

**Objectives**

The objectives of this research were to examine the visual culture associated with each movement to argue that both exploit violence under the endorsement of faith using similar tactics under differing conditions. In the case of Santa Muerte, visual expressions of faith included jewelry, tattoos, altars, figures, and votive candles. In contrast, ISIS only expresses its visual identity through style of dress, photographs, videos, and social media. This research asserts that despite their differing visual identities, the violent activities associated with both ISIS and Santa Muerte reflect underlying commonalities between these two movements.

**Methods**

The research presented in this paper was compiled through current news articles, online periodicals, and books. The method of comparison contrasts the two culture’s visual identity through their governments, followers, ceremonies, media publicity, practices, places of worship, and iconography. It looks at the historical context for each movement in relation to their justification of violence via religion.

**Results**

These two religions portray a dangerous movement birthed within anomic societies. Strict, austere, and extremely conservative, ISIS utilizes a no-nonsense attitude towards the rest of the world. All who do not support the movement are considered a threat to ISIS. Therefore, the image they project is interpreted as a negative one by outside cultures. Unfortunately, the cultural spotlight is dominated by these extremists, distorting the image of Islam as a whole due to extensive media coverage of their heinous acts. Likewise, the media coverage of the criminality associated with the cult of Santa Muerte is becoming an identity for the crime ridden underbelly of Mexico. Rivaling popular saints such as the Virgin of Guadalupe, Santa Muerte’s support rises from a cry of help from a civilization in jeopardy. She is the reflection of failing economy, poverty, and the desperation of the Mexican people.

**Conclusions**

Both Isis and Santa Muerte reflect a fight for power and utilize violence under the sanction of religion. ISIS And Santa Muerte use violence to communicate a discontent with the status of their societies. In the case of Santa Muerte, the Mexican people turn to the only justice they have in this world: a saint of death. This betrays their desire for equalization parallel to the unbending equality of death itself. For ISIS, their regime is a reflection of their aim to purify and unite all under the strict conformity of a single banner for the sake of power disguised as religious zeal.

**References**


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