

Article

Mothers and Spirits: Religious Identity, Alcohol, and Death

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Abstract: Mothers and Spirits examines the intersection of women, alcohol, and death through a comparative analysis. Offering a brief history of the study of drinking, followed by a short analysis of drinking in European and Chinese cultures, Cann examines two religious texts central to the roles of women and alcohol in Chinese religious thought and Christianity. Finally, Cann utilizes the historical and textual background to contextualize her ethnographic study of women, alcohol, and death in Mexican Catholicism, Chinese religions, and American Southern Baptist Christianity. Cann argues that both alcohol and temperance are used as a way to forge, cement, and create gender identity, constructing alternate discourses of power and inclusivity.

Keywords: women; Mary; Mulian; alcohol; Baptist; Santa Muerte; death; female; drinking; temperance

“Let beer be for those who are perishing, wine for those who are in anguish!

Let them drink and forget their poverty and remember their misery no more.”

—Proverbs 31:6,7

1. Introduction

Examining the intersection of women, alcohol, and death through a comparative analysis of both text and practice reveals that alcohol and gender intersect in such a way as to create an alternative discourse of, and access to, agency. Alcohol and temperance are used as a way to forge, cement, and create gender identity, constructing alternate discourses of power and inclusivity. Through an analysis of texts, historical analysis, and ethnographic case studies of Mexican Catholicism, Chinese religions, and American Southern Baptist Christianity, it becomes evident that alcohol and motherhood intersect to provide women with alternate economies to power. In the Chinese and Mexican Catholic cases, alcohol and the symbolism of motherhood is utilized as a way to circumnavigate traditional claims to power, creating alternate routes to legitimation and recognition. In the Southern Baptist case, women also receive power from alcohol, but through its regulation and an emphasis on temperance, rather than its consumption. Baptist women, particularly Baptist mothers, enforcing abstinence, are able to assert their claims as virtuous and moral leaders of church and home through the absence of alcohol. In all three cases, images of motherhood and the power of women are made stronger through alcohol, whether through its presence or absence.

The three cases are deliberately chosen—seemingly disparate and different, all three reveal a deeper connection between symbols of motherhood, death, and alcohol, constructing alternate discourses of belonging and exclusion in images of the afterlife and in everyday religiosity. Utilizing examples from Asia, Latin America, and the contemporary United States also allows one to consider the possibility that perhaps the relationship between women and alcohol is not merely coincidental, but

possibly universal.¹ In both Chinese and Mexican Catholic religious folk practices, alcohol—symbolic blood, and giver of life—is a transformative mediating agent that links people in life to those in death. The alcohol offerings in Chinese religious practice are given at the gravesite, and are meant to counter the polluting effects of childbirth blood in afterlife, purifying mothers, while simultaneously linking them to their children through the consumption of the bloodbowl (symbolized by wine). Tequila offerings to Santa Muerte (Saint Death) reinforce both local and national identity, while challenging more traditional and patriarchal discourses of state and church, and granting alternate access to spiritual power. I examine the prayers and practices of Santa Muerte as both a literal and figurative inverse of Mary, Catholic Mother of God.² Here, the Mother of Life has been turned into the Mother of Death, but all women, as mothers, introduce their babies to death by bringing them into the cycle of life. These two examples are contrasted to Southern Baptist religiosity, in which both alcohol and symbols of death (the crucifix) are missing from the sanctuary, and mothers are charged with the responsibility of keeping the values of the home through temperance. In the Southern Baptist example, women become distinct from men by becoming guardians of family morality through the denial and governance of alcohol. The absence of alcohol in the Southern Baptist church corroborates the equally absent corpse of the dead Jesus, yet women (not men) remain responsible/liable. The three examples offer, through entirely different models, similar conclusions—that alcohol offers women not merely an alternate economy, but an alternate access to agency, in both the sacred and profane realms.

The fermentation of alcohol makes it a dangerous and powerful drink—a drink that provides access to shamanic states while challenging mortality. Since alcohol can be preserved without going bad (and in fact, often becomes better with preservation), it has long been viewed as a drink that defies death, and early names given to alcohol across cultures bear this out (e.g., the Greek term *nectar*, or the Indo-European version, *mead*, etymologically defined as “immortal drink”) [3]. More recent descriptors, such as *whiskey* or *brandy*, were equally optimistic, derived from the Latin *aqua vitae*, or water of life.³ Alcohol is powerful and dangerous not merely because it creates alternate states of mind, but because it challenges mortality itself. Women, particularly in their roles as mothers, are equally dangerous—as guardians of both past and future, birth and death, mothers both give life, yet introduce their children into death. Mothers and (alcoholic) spirits both mediate life and death, sacred and profane, this world and other world, situated as they are on the boundaries of church and home.

2. A Brief History of Drinking

One of the oldest drinks in the history of humankind, alcohol has traditionally been associated in many cultures with a rich symbolism of water, milk, and blood [5]. Historically, alcohol was one of the safest drinks to consume, as many places in the world did not have voluminous or potable water supplies, and alcohol could be made, stored, and drunk when water was not readily available. Alcoholic beverages in the ancient world, with their antimicrobial qualities and relatively low alcohol content (generally 1% in contrast to the higher alcohol content of 7%–20% found in beer, wine, and liquor of today) were relatively easy to produce, preserve, store, and transport, and offered quantifiable health benefits in contrast to water.

¹ While I realize it has somewhat fallen out of fashion to offer universal constructs, I do this by relying heavily on William Paden’s notion of “aspectual focus,” while also remaining cognizant of J.Z. Smith’s emphasis on difference, examining a comparison of seemingly disparate phenomena through a focal lens of alcohol, women and death. See [1,2].

² I have focused on the Santa Muerte example (rather than an example from mainstream Catholicism and the many examples related to the Virgin Mary) for two reasons: (1) focusing on the intersection between women and alcohol in Santa Muerte reveals a paradigm in contemporary folk Catholicism in which Santa Muerte reflects the internal double of the Virgin Mary; and (2) the recent work on Santa Muerte tends to focus on the practices of folk religiosity, somewhat neglecting the textual evidence, and I wanted to provide the reader (initial and brief) access to this rich body of material.

³ See ([4], p. 169) more on this. Liebmann’s history of alcohol—sixty years old this year—remains one of the better cultural histories of alcohol in the field today.

Mary Douglas's seminal text, *Constructive Drinking*, first published in 1987, examined the role of drinking in society and communities from an ethnographic viewpoint [6]. Douglas argued for three functions of drinking—as a way of creating and reinforcing existing social bonds, introducing the symbolism of an idealized world, and drinking as an alternative economy.⁴ Drinking, like eating, is an inherently social practice that has been incorporated into various religious rituals, and is so basic to human survival that the dearth of studies regarding drinking symbolism may reflect our assumptions that because it is so common, it cannot possibly have symbolic meaning. But the choice of drink, like food, is important, and reflects many things, from the broader societal infrastructure to class, status, gender, age, and religious identity. What we choose to drink is as much an indicator of identity as our foods, the homes we live in, and the cars we drive. Examining the function of drinking and, more specifically, alcoholic beverages in funerals and memorialization rituals, reveals much not just about the world of the living, but also about conceptions of the afterlife.

Alcohol creates both social cohesion and social disruption. It has been known to foster homosocial bonds and provide a counter-discourse against domestic narratives,⁵ and in times of temperance or prohibition, consuming alcohol can be viewed as one way to formulate counter-narratives against the state or dominant cultural narrative. Precisely because of its inebriating qualities, alcohol has served historically as a drink offering an escape and reassertion of the individual self against some of the more restrictive aspects of society and social control. Throughout the history of the world, alcohol has cycled through periods of acceptance and periods of prohibition, but its close association in nearly all cultures with festivals, holidays, and celebrations means that alcohol has often been associated with folk movements and traditions. Alcohol, thus, functions simultaneously as a drink that encourages social cohesion, while offering an anti-structural discourse that challenges authority. It is no surprise then that alcohol has been so closely tied with both narratives surrounding death and death rituals themselves. Both death and alcohol occupy a liminal space in the everyday world, offering a counter-narrative to traditional roles, time, control and gender. Both the presence of, and specific proscription against, alcohol provide clues into notions of the afterlife, relationships between the living and the dead, and the intersection between life and death from a religious viewpoint.

Historically, in Europe, alcohol has been considered a product of the domestic arts that both women and religious clergy not only had access to, but utilized and capitalized upon to help them enter into the everyday market economy. Like many quotidian consumables, the various kinds of alcohol were classified and typologized to signify particular classes and genders. Until the last two hundred years or so in Europe, beer-making was considered to belong to the realm of women's work, while wine-making was generally relegated to the realm of men.⁶ Beer was regularly consumed by both genders, and for many years was the primary source of hydration, particularly since the process of making beer generally involved boiling water, thus eliminating microbials and other water-borne pathogens, such as typhus. Wine, on the other hand, was viewed as a drink of the upper classes, with

⁴ One of the more interesting aspects of Douglas' study of alcohol is its use as an alternative economy. Alternative economies are those systems that use other sources as a form of currency. In this case, food and drink became part of a popular barter system that allowed one to exchange food commodities for other goods. This included all sorts of foods, grain staples, and alcohol. Alcohol could be stored and preserved which made it a consistent commodity on the barter market. Since Douglas, the history and study of drinking has remained somewhat marginal in academia, and the majority of studies on drinking analyze it from the perspective of behavior or health outcomes. The Drinking Studies Network is an interdisciplinary group of contemporary scholars who are conducting work on alcohol from a historical or cultural perspective [7].

⁵ "The rituals of male drinking and socializing together in coffeehouses and bars, although emphasizing masculinity, are directed toward obscuring male dependency on the female members of their family. By excluding women from coffeehouses men reinforce a doubtful female subordination." ([8], pp. 7–8).

⁶ Judith Bennet's study notes that beer brewing and selling was largely located in the realm of women's work until 1350, but by 1600 beer brewing and selling transitioned to men's work. Bennet relates these changes in part to society's shifting views of the role of women. She writes that a marriage contract was viewed as a socially secure way to enforce broader social contracts involving money (in other words, the husbands could be counted upon should the wife somehow evade her legal and contractual responsibilities), and that in this way, beer brewing gradually shifted to the realm of men's work. For more, see [9].

ale and beer more common and accessible. As religious communities developed in medieval Europe, these (mostly male) communities gradually co-opted beer-making, relegating women's work to the domestic arts, and beer-brewing as a more male-dominated activity.⁷ This continues to be the case today, where judging by most advertising campaigns, beer is primarily considered to be a man's drink, and wine is primarily relegated to the realm of women.⁸ Thus, the types of alcohol consumed, the ways in which they are viewed, and the process associated with alcohol-making has shifted across various times and cultures. The important point here is that alcohol, like death, is a cultural and social construction, and the social status, attitudes, consumption patterns, and laws and regulations regarding alcohol shift and change with time.⁹ Alcohol production in Europe—beer made first by women in their homes, then by religious monastics in their religious communities—and finally moving to the slave plantations of the new world (where they made rum from sugar cane or gin from juniper berries)—belonged to the liminal populations who did not have traditional occupations and career paths.¹⁰ The importance of alcohol as an alternative economy is central here, as alcohol production allowed for those on the fringes of traditional market economies access to, and freedom from, the constraints of traditional hierarchical systems. This also may be why alcohol has cycled in and out of favor with state authorities, as it threatens traditional authority and economies, granting access to those that the government seeks to exclude.

In Asia, where wine-making from grapes was traded for the fermenting of rice and a much stronger rice wine (with an alcohol content from 40–65%), alcohol production remained within the realm of men, and women were generally banned from the process, especially in the fermentation process, as they were considered to be a pollutant to the spiritual, healing, and medicinal qualities of alcohol. In both Chinese religion and medicine, the idea of achieving a balance between Yin and Yang is essential to maintaining not only equilibrium and harmony in the cosmos, but also the health of the body. Since women are considered to be fundamentally Yin, and alcohol, essentially Yang, women could not be involved with the making of alcohol as they could dilute the Yang strength found in spirits. As Li Shizehen wrote in *The Bencao Gangmu* (Compendium of Materia Medica): “Wine is pure yang in nature, and pungent and sweet in flavor, thus it has the effects of invigorating vital function and dispersing pathogens. Wine is dry and hot in property, and is thus used to expel dampness and cold” [13]. Uses of wine in Chinese medicine were generally geared towards “cold” diseases caused by too much Yin and, thus, requiring balance through Yang, and the heat-generating properties of wine. Thus, wine was considered to be effective for those diseases such as arthritis, chest pain, and post-partum injuries, as well as impotence and infertility, diseases also caused by an overabundance of Yin [13]. Wine, in moderation, is believed to invigorate the body, reducing stagnation and stimulating the body. Thus, alcohol in the Chinese context was traditionally associated not only with Yang, and properties of male characteristics, but was also fairly strictly relegated to the world of men—to produce, to consume, and to regulate. Women were generally banned from drinking, except in rituals and religious ceremonies, or to partake in wine drinking for medicinal purposes [14]. Having given a brief analysis of both the study of drinking as a field, and a short history of the importance of alcohol in Christian and Chinese cultures over time, I turn now to an analysis of wine and women in Christian and Buddhist scriptures. I want to link the practices, and these models to their texts and, thus, I offer

⁷ Early monastic communities offered beer and ale to travelling pilgrims visiting their monasteries, considering it an act of hospitality, gradually developing the sale of alcohol as a powerful alternate economy. For more on the history of this, see [10].

⁸ In fact, according to a study conducted by the Wine Market Council, 80% of all wine purchases in the United States today are made by women. For more, see [11].

⁹ Even notions of “drunkenness,” and definitions of inebriation are subject to cultural and societal interpretation.

¹⁰ The production of alcohol by slave economies and plantations did not merely aid the slaves, but added to the wealth of the plantation owners. However, it also gave slaves a marketable skillset that allowed some slaves access to an alternate economy that added value to their everyday lives, which (some) plantation owners recognized also kept slaves tied to their land and increased their loyalty. For more on alternate slave economies see [12].

the reader a brief hermeneutic exploration of the Buddhist and Christian texts regarding mothers and alcohol as a way to situate the practices and interpretations that emerge out of them.

3. Women and Wine in Christian and Buddhist Scriptures: Mary and Mulian's Mother

The importance of the link between the role of motherhood and alcohol is found in both Christian and Chinese scriptures. In both stories, the motherhood of the female characters—Mary, as the mother of Jesus, and Mulian's mother—is central to the story. The bond between mother and son in each story is the compelling bond that puts the narrative in action. The demand for wine—either as first miracle that reveals Jesus' mission on earth, or as purifying agent for the pollution of childbirth—is made by women to their male child, and becomes the narrative pivot through which death is overcome. It is no mistake that the transformation of water into wine at a wedding feast is the first recorded miracle in the New Testament, and is done so at the request of Jesus' mother,

When the wine was gone, Jesus' mother said to him, "They have no more wine." "Woman, why do you involve me?" Jesus replied. "My hour has not yet come." His mother said to the servants, "Do whatever he tells you." Nearby stood six stone water jars, the kind used by the Jews for ceremonial washing, each holding from twenty to thirty gallons. Jesus said to the servants, "Fill the jars with water"; so they filled them to the brim. Then he told them, "Now draw some out and take it to the master of the banquet." They did so, and the master of the banquet tasted the water that had been turned into wine. He did not realize where it had come from, though the servants who had drawn the water knew. Then he called the bridegroom aside and said, "Everyone brings out the choice wine first and then the cheaper wine after the guests have had too much to drink; but you have saved the best till now"¹¹

It is important to note that it is through Mary (both physically as a mother giving birth to Jesus, and symbolically, through her insistence that Jesus transform water) that Jesus actually fulfills his duty as messiah. The association of Mary as mother with the first miracle of transforming the water into wine is significant, as it is Jesus' first public act as miracle worker, and the miracle is put into motion at Mary's behest. The miracle in the wedding feast symbolizes the notion that salvation is meant for everyone, not simply the first guests, and the observations made by the host of the wedding feast affirm this fact. The "good wine" is served last, revealing that even those who come to the feast later can not only still enjoy the wine, but have even better wine.¹² The story of transforming water into wine can be contrasted to the story of Moses, who turned waters of the rivers of Egypt into blood. And the symbolism of transforming water into wine is not lost on the Jewish and Christian reader—Jesus is transforming water into blood, symbolized by wine (we see this symbolism again later through the Christian Eucharist). Mary is essential to the story as she operates not only as the dual symbol of woman who brought Jesus into the world and implored him to perform his first miracle, but also as a foil of Eve, and the nativity. Just as in the passage of Mulian and his mother (below), it is not merely Mary's role as woman that is emphasized, but mother. It is through Mary as mother that Jesus is brought into the world, redeeming the world from its fallen state, and it is in Mary's role as mother, that Jesus is requested to perform the transformation of water into wine. The passage underscores the importance of Mary as mother, as creator, and the transformation of the world and the water through her relationship to Jesus.

Similarly, in the Chinese Buddhist canon, the desperate cries of Mulian's mother as a hungry ghost implores Mulian to descend into the depths of hell to rescue her from the Blood Pool Hell,

¹¹ John 2:3–10, NIV Bible.

¹² This passage also parallels Matthew 20:1–16, the Parable of the Workers in the Vineyard, in which a master pays all those who work in the field the same pay—even those who arrive later in the day. The message in both of these reveals that the fruits of salvation do not vary, those "late to the party" also receive the good wine.

When Mu-lian heard this [that his mother was trapped in the Blood Pool Hell], he was very sad and he asked the warden, How can we repay (bao da) our moms (a niang) for the kindness of giving birth to us in order that they may leave the blood-pool hell?" The hell warden answered, "Teacher, you only need to carefully be a filial son or daughter, respect the Three Jewels [the Buddha, the Sangha, and the Dharma], and for the sake of your mom, hold Blood Bowl Feasts for three years, including organizing Blood Bowl Meetings (xue peng sheng hui) to which you invite monks to recite this sutra for a full day, and have confessions (chan hui). Then there will be a prajna boat to carry the mothers across the River Nai He and they will see five-colored lotuses appear in the blood pool, and the sinners will come out happy and contrite and they will be able to take rebirth (chao sheng) in a Buddha Land ([15], p. 206).

When Mulian remembers his mother through drinking a bowl of wine, meant to symbolize the blood of childbirth that his mother shed for him in her birth, Mulian is able to offer, through ingestion, a reciprocal gift of blood repaying his childbirth debt. Like Jesus in the Christian story, Mulian is also called to action by his mother (albeit in a very different way) through the reminder of how she has already paid her debt for his life, and now he must return the favor through the drinking of wine. Chinese women who have given birth during their lifetime are generally believed to be trapped in a pool of blood following their death, because the polluting effects of childbirth blood have not been counteracted ([16], pp. 89–90). The post-partum period after a woman gives birth is considered to be a period of imbalance and heavily Yin, and the "solution" to counterbalance this post-partum stage is to eat chicken, eggs, chicken broth soup, and wine, all believed to help the woman regain her strength, and recover from her childbirth; they are also foods and drinks considered to be heavily Yang. However, these foods counter the woman's Yin state in life, and do not extend to her death when she is expected to pay off her debt for the childbirth blood. Mulian, as male and yang element, and the offering of wine, also heavily yang, balances out the yin/female/childbirth blood, with a debt repayment and reenactment of life, rebalancing the cosmos. While the mother gave birth to her son, it is the son who must now rescue his mother from death. The story of Mulian illustrates the complex role women play in the Chinese religious cosmology, and why wine remains one of the central components for both Chinese funerals and memorialization rituals. Mulian's mother is considered to be a hungry ghost,¹³ and it is only through the son's remembrance of her life that she can be redeemed. The balance, thus, is asserted in this passage between male and female, parent and child, life and death, wine and blood.

Both the story of Jesus' first miracle and Mulian's descent into hell tie together women and wine to relay larger messages about their respective religious traditions, and offer insights into conceptions of the afterlife. In the miracle story of Jesus, the transformation of water into wine reminds readers of past Biblical narratives,¹⁴ while foreshadowing the sacrificial offering of blood on the cross. The story emphasizes the inclusive nature of Christian salvation—even latecomers can benefit from the blood sacrifice of Jesus. Mulian's story also democratizes the afterlife—emphasizing the bodhisattva ideal and offering a simple Chinese ritual that allows equal access to Buddhist heaven, for women as well as men. One overlap that cannot be overlooked here is the role of motherhood in both scriptures. In both

¹³ In Chinese religion, hungry ghosts (餓鬼 èguǐ, the Chinese translation for the Sanskrit preta) are beings that reside in one of the six Buddhist realms of existence (Buddhist hell). Literally depicted as beings with pinhole openings for necks, and cavernous bloated stomachs, hungry ghosts can never satiate their desires and are metaphorical representatives of beings who have deep desire, addictions, or obsessions. Hungry ghosts are believed to come back to haunt the living when the rituals for the deceased have not been properly observed, and in this way the story of the hungry ghost is really about the ties between the living and the dead. For more on hungry ghosts see [17].

¹⁴ In Exodus 7:20, Moses turned the waters of the Nile into blood, signifying the arrival of the first plague on the Egyptians and the Jews' status as God's chosen people; the turning of water into wine both serves as a reference to this act, while also signifying the future sacrifice to come. "Moses and Aaron did just as the LORD had commanded. He raised his staff in the presence of Pharaoh and his officials and struck the water of the Nile, and all the water was changed into blood" (NIV Bible).

stories, the motherhood of the female characters is central to their voice—in fact, in both stories it is the bond between mother and son that seems to compel the action in both stories to even occur and, in both stories, the women demand wine—whether transformed from water, or offered at the altar as a repayment for childbirth. The intersection between women, wine, motherhood, and death cannot be underscored enough. Now that I have given a brief background of the intersection of women and wine in Christian and Buddhist scriptures, I turn now to a few ethnographic analyses of the intersection of death, wine and women in contemporary rituals in Mexico, China, and the United States.

4. From Text to Ethnography: Women and Spirits in Mexico, China, and the United States

Comparing actions around alcohol, gender, and death in three ethnographic studies of China, Mexico, and the United States helps to give a picture of the ways in which alcohol and women intersect and influence understandings and conceptions of death and the afterlife. More importantly, though, alcohol and its presence or absence in rituals for, to, and about the dead has been used to define, demarcate, and reinforce gender roles in religious communities and understandings of the afterlife. Mexican folk practices involving Santa Muerte reveal a counter-narrative regarding alcohol and traditional Catholicism, utilizing the role of motherhood to critique, challenge, and invert the traditional views of death. The Chinese blood-bowl ritual offers a performative transformation of ties between mother and child through the drinking of wine that places the role of motherhood front and center in this life and the next. Finally, in contrast to both of the Mexican and Chinese practices, the absence of alcohol and Baptist branding through temperance, marks a decidedly different interpretation of gender, with women defined by their denial of alcohol and the practice of death rituals and funerals in spaces that have been publicly declared as alcohol-free.

4.1. Mexico

Like the scriptural passages of both Mary/Jesus and Mulian's mother/Mulian, Santa Muerte, or Saint Death, both capitalize on and benefit from her role as mother. The popularity of the mother goddess figure originates in pre-Columbian religiosity, and the association of motherhood symbolism and death were existent before the arrival of colonial Christianity. Santa Muerte strongly resembles the pre-Columbian goddess Coatlicue, in her fierceness and associations with both death and maternity.

All of the earth-mother goddesses were associated both with exuberant fertility and horrifying death, the earth as both womb and tomb of life ([18], p. 422). [De] Sahagun records the Aztec belief that Cihuacoatl, despite being the patron of women giving birth, walked at night “weeping and wailing, a dread phantom foreboding war” ([19], p. 3). Coatlicue, the divine mother who gave birth to gods and humans, was also thought to feed on human corpses and was called the “dirt devourer” ([20], p. 269; [21], p. 23).¹⁵

Coatlicue paved the way for the emergence of Santa Muerte, in tandem with the popularity of the virgin prototype in Mexican Catholicism. Ranked higher than saints, martyrs, angels, and even the Virgin Mary, by her followers, Santa Muerte is viewed as directly below God, in her ability to hear and answer prayers ([25], p. 59). She is given this place because she performs God's handiwork in both restoring life and bringing death, and is believed to be able to protect her adherents from death since she controls it. Santa Muerte is not officially sanctioned by the Roman Catholic Church, in part because she seems to be threatening the official pantheon of recognized and sponsored saints, and in the last five years or so, Santa Muerte has grown in both attention and adherents. Not to be confused with the more joyful and playful Calavera Catrina, the Mexican folk icon of the Day of the Dead celebrations,¹⁶ Santa Muerte is believed to be a Mexican incarnation of the European “Grim Reaper,” and Argentine

¹⁵ For more on this, see ([22], pp.31–32).

¹⁶ For a background on the history of Mexico's Day of the Dead, see [23,24].

San Muerte. She is distinct, however, in that unlike the European and Argentine versions, Santa Muerte appears as a female ([25], p. 189). To the outside and uneducated eye, however, Santa Muerte may look very similar to either Catrina or the Grim Reaper, as she is a skeleton, dressed in long robes, and carrying a scythe, and like the Virgin of Guadalupe,¹⁷ Santa Muerte's roots are distinctly local and indigenous.

Prayers to Santa Muerte often appropriate prayers to the Virgin Mary, either replacing Santa Muerte's name in places where the Mary's would generally be, or tacking on Santa Muerte to the already established church hierarchy of God and saints. In the most obvious example, Santa Muerte followers frequently pray the rosary, replacing the name of Mary with the name of Santa Muerte, symbolically uniting the two through ritual as well as role. The relationship between Santa Muerte and the Mary cannot be underscored enough, as Santa Muerte is, like Mary, described as mother, creator, life-giver, and patron saint of the disenfranchised and marginalized. To the outsider it may seem as though Santa Muerte is replicating Mary, supplanting Mary, or simply aiding Mary in her role as patron to the peripheral. Robinson Herrera writes, however, that Santa Muerte seems to have a dialectical relationship with the Virgin Mary:

In my mind, the dialectical relationship resembles something like this: Mary forgives us for the very things we ask Santa Muerte to do and Santa Muerte protects us when doing the very things for which Mary forgives. Seen in the light of Marx's dialectic the prayers that include both Mary and Santa Muerte make sense, the two deities don't threaten each other, rather they co-exist, each covering and guarding their specific divine territories, leaving it to supplicants to navigate the complicated paths that lead to a Catholicism that encompasses the gospel of prosperity, however one cares to define that prosperity.¹⁸

Santa Muerte and Mary work together in tandem—Mary forgiving the deeds that Santa Muerte performs, and Santa Muerte performing miracles that Mary cannot (or rather will not) perform. Supplicants refer to Santa Muerte with the same names given to Mary—Holy Mother, Saint, Protector, Mother of Mine, Mother of Tears—and anyone hearing these titles may at first confuse them with Mary. However, one aspect that stands out among prayers to Santa Muerte is the assertion by Santa Muerte followers that her power is stronger than even God, something that is never seen or read in prayers to the Virgin. In the Prayer to Santa Muerte, for example, titled “Mother of Tears,” petitioners pray the following: “In the name of the All-powerful God, more powerful is the mother of tears. I ask for your help, I beg you to cease the bad luck [surrounding] my house. Give me money, work, and good luck. Mother of tears, protect me from danger, protect me from evil, mother of tears, rescue me from this abyss where I find myself and give me protection from all affliction and evil. I dedicate myself to you today; hear the prayer I place at your feet. Amen.”¹⁹ The name given here to Santa Muerte—the Mother of Tears—begins like many prayers to Mary, tying together the role of mother as one who both suffers (in tears) and comforts (the suffering). However, it soon becomes quickly apparent that this Mother of Tears is not Mary, because we are told that she is even greater in power than the all-powerful God. The prayer is at once both an invocation for, and an inversion of, the traditional understanding of Mary, with gender, death, and power all shifting places in Santa Muerte. In another prayer, the “Prayer to Saint Death,” (see below) there is a similar inversion of this power—when the petitioner at

¹⁷ Patrizia Granziera's article does a nice job of explaining the relationship between the maternal symbolism of Coatlicue to the more contemporary images of the Virgin. See [26]. For more on the later development of this symbolism to current Santa Muerte iconography, see [25].

¹⁸ Email exchange with Robinson Herrera, 28 March 2016.

¹⁹ “En nombre del Dios Todopoderoso más poderoso, madre de las lágrimas, yo invoco tu ayuda, te pido para quitar la mala suerte de mi casa. Dame dinero, trabajo y buenasuerte. Madre de las lágrimas, protégeme del peligro, protégeme de todo mal, madre de las lágrimas, clamo a ti en este abismo donde me encuentro y te pido que me protegede toda aflicción y el mal. Consagrarme a ti en este día y poner mi petición a tus pies (estado su petición) Amén.” [27].

first prays to All Powerful God for placing Santa Muerte in her path, and then shifts audiences to Saint Death, requesting forgiveness, patience, protection, and guidance.

All Powerful God, I give thanks to you for putting Saint Death in my path. Holy Mother of mine, I give thanks to you for your help that delivers me and for giving those of us who are lost, your love, I beg you not to leave me, to watch over my path and over all of my family and over all that I love and care for. Mother of mine, please forgive me if occasionally, I am confused, have doubts, or do not trust [you]! It is not you, but [caused by] the people that surround me, forgive me if occasionally I do not trust in your great power. Teacher, I will attend to you when my enemy is near or when the sadness I feel becomes very great. Teacher, I will never forget that you exist, and that your presence is always with me in all ways and in all places, defend me from all things that want to harm me, Mother of mine, [and] I hope that even in my dreams I will be able to see you, and that no matter how hard it seems to see you, feel you, and hear you, I will never forget that you are nearer now and this gives me a happier life than the Creator that gave life. I give thanks to you, Mother of mine for watching over me and for all of mine, in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.²⁰

It is apparent in the end of the prayer, that when the petitioner says “I will never forget that you are nearer now and this gives me a happier life than the Creator that gave life,” that the traditional hierarchy of Mary below God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, has been reversed, and Santa Muerte may, in fact, be more powerful. What is invoked in this prayer is Santa Muerte’s role as mother, as creator and giver of life, the role traditionally given to Mary.

Similarly, just as Mary is viewed as the patron to the disenfranchised, and especially popular to women, Santa Muerte is also popular with the more marginal groups of Mexican society, and has been particularly noted in the news as a popular saint with undocumented immigrants, police workers, drug cartels, transgendered peoples, and the poor. What she seems to be most popular for in everyday life, however, is in preventing death, and repairing relationships—though her methods of doing this seem quite dissimilar from those of the Virgin Mary. Santa Muerte represents, in some ways, the anti-hero to the Virgin’s hero—a saint who is known for getting the job done any way she can. She is known for wreaking vengeance and justice, and will kill, hurt, and destroy to keep her supplicants safe and happy. Hence, her reputation as a somewhat dangerous saint. Promises made to Santa Muerte must be kept, and altars to her likeness need be replenished, cleaned, and regularly maintained, or else she is known to wreak havoc. Offerings at her altar are quotidian and common: e.g., the everyday vices of tobacco and alcohol, and the popular foods and sodas consumed by the working class.

Offerings at her altars, as well as her nicknames and wardrobe, reveal a saint that is cosmically Mexican. In other words, adherents view her as in some ways a supernatural version of themselves. Tequila, beer, cigarettes, and chocolate are placed at her altars in the belief that the White Girl likes consuming the same food, drink, and smokes that devotees enjoy. And like her adoring followers, she occasionally drinks to excess. In Morelia cult leader Vicente Pérez Ramos claimed that his skeleton saint likes to “get hammered,” sometimes drinking her favorite brand of tequila, Rancho Viejo ([25], p. 56).

²⁰ “Dios Todopoderoso, te agradezco haber puesto en mi camino a mi Santísima Muerte. Santísima Madre Mía, te agradezco toda tu ayuda que me brindas y nos das a todos los que te lo pedimos con amor, te pido que no te apartes de mí, cuida de mi camino y el de toda mi familia y el de todos los seres que amo y quiero. Madre mía, perdóname si algunas veces me desespero, dudo o desconfío, ! No de ti; sino de las personas que me rodean, perdóname si alguna vez desconfío de tu gran poder. Maestra, a ti acudiré cuando mi enemigo este cerca o cuando el dolor que siento sea muy grande. Maestra, nunca olvides que existo, has que tu presencia siempre este conmigo en todas partes y en todo lugar, defiéndeme de todos aquellos que quieran hacerme daño. Madre mía, concédeme que aunque sea en sueños yo te vea y nunca olvidare que lo que yo creía tan lejano como es el verte, tenerte y escucharte, ahora esta tan cerca y eso me hace el mortal mas feliz que el Creador le hay dado vida. Gracias te doy, Madre mía por cuidar de mi camino y el de todos los míos, en el nombre Padre, del Hijo y del Espiritu Santo. Amen.” [28].

This is another area where Mary and Santa Muerte both intersect and diverge; while Mary drank wine, and was both present and encouraging in Jesus' first miracle of the transformation of water into wine, it is not wine that Santa Muerte prefers. She favors alcohol that symbolizes ethnic and cultural Mexican identity—tequila, made from Mexican agave, locally produced, and popularly consumed, along with beer, is the drink of choice among Santa Muerte followers, and the drink of choice among the middle and lower classes. Chesnut argues, “A glass of chardonnay or cabernet sauvignon at the altar of Santa Muerte would seem like an overly effete offering for this rather earthy saint” ([25], pp. 72–74). It is no accident that the drink of choice for Santa Muerte is not the wine of the upper classes, but the everyday beverages of the working class. In Santa Muerte, and the altars devoted to her, alcohol and gender combine to form a religious response to restrictive and normative everyday values, through the worship of embodied death. The alcohol is not the church-sanctioned wine of communion or the vintage of the upper classes, but the alcohol most symbolic of both Mexican identity and the working class. The motherhood figure found in Santa Muerte is the opposite of the Virgin Mary, patiently and kindly suffering and waiting for her reward. Santa Muerte, as motherly icon, is fiercely protective of her children and has no problem seeking vengeance and retribution for her children if they have been wronged. I would argue, though, that Santa Muerte is not a reaction against the church, per se, but rather an internal critique against the church's (and symbolically, the Virgin Mary's) passiveness in the face of corruption, elitism, and patriarchy. Women and alcohol in rituals concerning Santa Muerte combine in a way that is not dissimilar to the story of Mary at the wedding feast—just as Mary invokes the beginning of the ministry of Jesus through the transformation of water into wine, Santa Muerte responds to the suffering of her followers through the offering of alcohol, demanding protection for those that the contemporary world seem content to ignore. Mary, traditionally viewed as the passive virgin female, is the one who initiates action, and works balance into a socially fragile and risky situation. She restores and protects those in socially exposed situations. The parable of turning the water into wine demonstrates an internal double of Mary that comes to the surface in comparison with the contemporary Santa Muerte.²¹

4.2. China

The intersection of motherhood and alcohol is similarly found in Chinese death rituals, particularly in the blood bowl ritual. In China, because kinship lineages are traced through patrilineal bloodlines, a woman was traditionally not given her place in the family ancestral tablet unless she had given birth to children, securing her place not only in her husband's family, but in the afterlife as well [31]. However, though she may have earned her rights as a legitimate ancestor in the Chinese afterlife through giving birth to children, the polluting effects of childbirth remained, and the blood that polluted the earth from giving birth in life, needed to be ritually countermanded following death. The mother cannot be released from the “blood bowl hell” without ritual aid from the living, neatly tying the realms of the living to the realm of the dead through the mediating agent of alcohol.²² The functional purpose of this ritual is to aid the deceased in their transition from earthly spirit to afterlife ancestor, while giving grieving children a ritual that, like praying the rosary for one's mother following her death, allows them to feel as though they are helping their mother in her transition. The blood bowl ritual simultaneously unites and unties the realms of the living and the dead, with alcohol serving as the mediating agent that reinforces and transforms the bonds between mother and child.

Maxine Miska, in her fieldwork in a Hakka village in contemporary China, describes the “blood bowl” ritual:

²¹ Two additional sources that offer excellent and interesting insights into the development of Santa Muerte are [29,30].

²² See [15,32] for an extended overview and analysis of the Tale of Mulian.

The ritual, as I saw it performed, involves setting up a small stool in the courtyard, under which sand is piled. Painted duck eggs and colored pennants are arranged in the sand. A bowl filled with wine is placed in the corner of the sand pile beneath the stool. This stool with its flags and sand represent a fortress guarded by demons of the underworld. Imprisoned within the fortress is the soul of the dead woman, wallowing in a pool of blood, represented by the bowl of wine. In order to secure her release, her descendants drink the bowl of wine, symbolically drinking the blood in the pool of hell. Once done, her soul is released from this torture, and her passage through the underworld to rebirth is expedited ([16], p. 90).

The ritual utilizes wine as a way to ensure that the deceased has been fully transformed into an ancestor, and can no longer come back as a spirit to harm the living.²³ Both Miska and Ahern assert the danger of mothers in the Chinese kinship system—women who are considered outsiders to the families they marry into—who are needed to extend kinship lineages, and yet through their relationships with their children, are also viewed as possible threats to the very family they are responsible for extending [16,34]. The tie, then, of the polluting effects of childbirth blood with the dangers of vengeful mothers seeking retribution on their families as spirits after death, is believed to be muted through the blood bowl ritual of drinking wine. The ritual both affirms and negates the relationship between mothers and their children—viewing these relationships as both dangerous and polluting—while also affirming the strong bonds and kinship ties between them.

Wine becomes the mediating and transformative agent—mediating through its link between life and death, spirit and ancestor, mother and child—and transformative through its ability not only to negate, but also to bridge and change. Wine is essential to transform the polluting effects of childbirth so they are no longer dangerous, and to transform the deceased mother from a spirit who can haunt the living into an ancestor who can help her relatives. It is wine that marks the change from child into adult—symbolized here in the shift from the mother who gave birth to the child to the dutiful child who now helps release the mother from the bonds of hell, and transforms the mother from earthly person to otherworldly ancestor, no longer bound by the bonds of their earthly existence. Alcohol shifts the marginal ghost mother into a legitimate ancestor, one that can now be brought within the official (state and familial) pantheon, no longer representing a possible danger or threat to society or person. Just as mothers are marginal in everyday Chinese society, so are ghosts to Chinese afterlife, and the blood bowl ritual allows for a way to routinize this danger. In the offerings to Santa Muerte, and in the wine drunk on behalf of ghosts, alcohol not only mediates, but transforms—in Mexico beyond the state religion, and in China, to bring the ghosts back into its confines. Now, I turn to American Southern Baptists and their temperance movement to demonstrate the ways in which the absence of alcohol also became not merely a source of identity, but also a form of branding, for Baptist women, and more specifically Baptist mothers.

5. The United States: Baptist Branding and Temperance

In contrast to both of the Mexican and Chinese practices, the absence of alcohol and Baptist branding through temperance, marks a decidedly different interpretation of gender, with Southern Baptist death rituals and funerals in spaces that have been publically declared alcohol-free. Baptists were not always publically against alcohol. In fact, in the 1700s, a Baptist minister named Elijah Craig invented bourbon, while another Baptist minister opened one of the first commercial bourbon distilleries in the United States, considered by many to be the quintessential Southern drink in the

²³ The distinction is an important one in Chinese religion, and marked by ritual differences: Wolf writes, “Gods are contrasted with ghosts and ancestors; ghosts are contrasted with gods and ancestors; and ancestors are contrasted with gods and ghosts. For example gods are offered uncooked (or whole) food, ghosts and ancestors are offered cooked food [because they were at one time human]; ghosts are worshipped outside homes and temples; gods and ancestors are worshipped inside; ancestors are given an even number of incense sticks; ghosts and gods are given an odd number of sticks” ([33], p. 7).

United States [35]. About a hundred years later, however, in 1896, the Southern Baptist Convention denounced alcohol, declaring that anyone who sold and/or drank alcohol should be excommunicated from the Southern Baptist church.²⁴ The resolution prohibited fellowship to anyone who engaged in alcohol trade or who indulged in drinking, declaring that anyone who engaged in liquor “traffic” was engaged in a sin against God [36]. The public denunciations of alcohol demarcated clear expectations of both gender roles and social spaces—with women expected to participate in social roles defined by sanctity found in the alcohol-free space of the church and the home. The Southern Baptist female ideal is, and continues to be, framed by the notion that the ideal Christian woman is a homemaker, whose primary goal and identity is geared to the family. This gender aspiration has been confirmed by the 1987 Southern Baptist Convention resolution stating, “Full-time homemakers have shown dedication, diligence, and unwavering commitment to their families and to the Lord who has ordained the home as a workplace” [37]. The role of a “good” mother, according to Southern Baptists, is a woman who, as homemaker and moral guide, steers her family away from the consumption of alcohol. Six years earlier, in 1981, the Southern Baptist Convention tied the role of mother and alcohol together in a clear message stating that the two should not meet:

WHEREAS, Families bear the responsibility for rearing healthy and loving children, providing creative life styles free from stress and all drug dependencies; and the family is the main target of the alcohol beverage industry with massive home advertising campaigns; and Family life is under increasing stress due to the use of alcohol in the home, resulting in more divorce, battered women, child abuse, birth defects; and Over 561 alcohol related deaths occur each day; ...and seven and a half million youth between the ages of fourteen and seventeen who have alcohol related problems; and Expectant mothers need to be aware of the dangers of consuming alcoholic beverages during pregnancy; ...Be it therefore RESOLVED, That we challenge families to consider what alcohol is doing to them, and to be aware of the uncritical way alcohol is accepted in society with little attention given to it as America’s number one drug problem; and Be it further RESOLVED, That we educate the children in our churches to abstain from use of alcoholic beverages and the abuse of drugs; and...That Southern Baptists renew their commitment to minister compassionately to those who have drinking problems and to relate to their families in redemptive ways [38].

While the resolution placed the responsibility of abstinence on families, it is the effects of alcohol on children and mothers that are the central focus in this resolution, with alcohol posed as the problem for family structures and the breakdown of family in society. Long past prohibition, the resolution (this one was passed in 1981, though there are a total of 69 resolutions on alcohol alone from 1886 to 2006) is clear on its proscription on alcohol. In an interview with a local female Baptist pastor, who was raised in the Southern Baptist tradition, the attitudes regarding alcohol were confirmed. She told me, “I was raised that drinking alcohol is a sin. It was such a big deal. You never know if you are an alcoholic, so if you take just one sip, that could be the end of it.”²⁵ Garret Peck confirms this attitude, quoting Tim Johnson, “in Baptist congregations that tend to encourage a detachment from mainstream values, the stigma is greater. This is generally true of congregations in poorer and more rural communities...The

²⁴ “That we, the members of the Southern Baptist Convention, reassert our truceless and uncompromising hostility to the manufacture, sale, importation and transportation, of alcoholic beverages in any and all their forms. We regard the policy of issuing government licenses for the purpose of carrying on the liquor traffic as a sin against God and a dishonor to our people. We furthermore announce it as our conviction that we should by all legitimate means oppose the liquor traffic in municipality, county, State, and nation. Furthermore, we announce it as the sense of this body that no person should be retained in the fellowship of a Baptist church who engages in the manufacture or sale of alcoholic liquors, either at wholesale or retail, who invests his money in the manufacture or sale of alcoholic liquors, or who rents his property to be used for distilleries, wholesale liquor houses, or saloons. Nor do we believe that any church should retain in its fellowship any member who drinks intoxicating liquors as a beverage, or visits saloons or drinking places for the purpose of such indulgence” [36].

²⁵ Interview with anonymous source, 24 March 2016.

Southern Baptist Convention equates alcohol with drug use and even calls alcohol a gateway to other drugs” ([39], p. 188). What is interesting, though, is that this banishing of alcohol has functioned to serve as a sort of branding for Southern Baptist Christian identity, but even more importantly, abstinence and its enforcement are carried out by women. This is particularly challenging, however, when the inconsistencies regarding alcohol consumption carried out in social contexts are generally performed by men. In one study carried out in a Southern Baptist church in Alabama, the author found that, “Of the fifty-four cases of ‘excessive drinking,’ ‘too much drinking,’ ‘intoxication,’ and ‘whiskey-making,’ all involved males and all but one were lodged against white males” ([40], p. 40). In this context, then, the consumption of alcohol in the home becomes a transgressive act that reinforces homo-social behavior, reasserting men’s control over women. The banning of alcohol in public worship spaces relegates alcohol consumption to the domestic sphere, making private and/or hiding those behaviors regarding alcohol consumption, forcing women to turn to public methods (shaming) to regain the control they are expected to maintain over their domestic spaces.²⁶

These suspicions of alcohol in the church act at odds with the role of alcohol in the Christian text of the first miracle, and subvert the notion of alcohol as a symbol of blood sacrifice, alcohol as material evidence of sacred miracles, or even alcohol as mediating agent through which Christ’s ministry is first realized. The function of alcohol in Southern Baptist terms is a symbol of the world and its vices, not as symbol of God’s potential to save through sacrifice and mystery. Unlike the text of Mary and the first miracle in which alcohol brings new life through motherhood and sacrifice, in Southern Baptist culture, alcohol serves to separate and segregate. Abstinence in the Southern Baptist context mediates Baptist identity through a counter-cultural response to society. Alcohol’s banishment from both the church sanctuary and the home serves to replicate the banishment of the crucified Christ on the cross and the sacramental theology of the Eucharist. Just as the dead body of Christ does not hang on the cross and wine is not served in the Baptist sanctuary, death itself has disappeared from Southern Baptist churches. Instead, a cross, empty of the tortured body, hangs in the front of the sanctuary, and grape juice, devoid of its alcoholic content, is served to the monthly (or sometimes, yearly) congregants. Corresponding to the elimination of alcohol (and death) from the Baptist sanctuary, many Baptist publications and websites argue over the supposed “fact” that Jesus didn’t actually transform water into wine but into grape juice, giving extended explanations of the difference between alcohol contents of ancient world wines and today.²⁷ In Southern Baptist Christianity, the emphasis is not on death, but the resurrection,²⁸ thus alcohol—that symbolic beverage mediating life and death, sacred and profane—is equally missing. Alcohol, symbolic blood, is not the transformative mediating agent that we see in Chinese religion and Mexican Catholic folk practices. The rejection of transubstantiation may be evident in social and cultural identity that extends beyond the church and family²⁹. Both alcohol and temperance are used as a way to forge, cement, and create gender identity, constructing alternate discourses of belonging and exclusion both in afterlife conceptions, and everyday religious identity.

6. Conclusions

Offerings of tequila to Santa Muerte in Mexico serve to reinforce local and national identity, while challenging traditional discourses of state and church, providing supplicants with an alternate religiosity that utilizes established prayers and rituals and playing on the tensions between the two

²⁶ Pevey, Williams and Ellison confirm similar findings with their sociological study of women’s bible classes. See [41].

²⁷ The alcohol content was reduced, but not negligent; this is evident not just in archeological explorations of sediment in wine jars, but also in the many writings of Paul, who argued that consumption of wine should be for the stomach (i.e., its antimicrobial properties), rather than its ability to induce an altered state. The wine in Jesus’ time, then, was indeed alcoholic. For examples of the typical construction of the argument against Jesus’ turning water into alcoholic wine, see [42] Boatman argues that, “The wine, or grape juice used in the New Testament by the Lord would be the same as us drinking sodas, tea, or Kool-Aid instead of water.”

²⁸ Andrew Stern offers an excellent analysis of the symbolism of cross vs. crucifix in afterlife conceptions. See [43].

²⁹ See [44] for more on Baptist identity.

“mothers” of Mary and Santa Muerte. Santa Muerte offers a challenge to the more traditional role of the Virgin Mary as a suffering (i.e., passive) mother, while giving access to a feminist discourse of power that capitalizes on the dangers of death and violence. Wine from the blood bowl ritual in Chinese religions provides a link between this world and the afterlife, allowing for children and mothers to transform their relationships in such a way to safely shift spirits into ancestors. Access to the mother is granted through a symbolic reverse participation of childbirth itself, and the participation of the male child in “undoing” his own pollution, simultaneously binding mother and child and establishing the continuing importance of the mother’s role, even in death. Mothers can haunt the living if they are forgotten. Finally, Southern Baptist temperance operates as a form of religious branding, distinguishing women from men as the guardians of family morality and church values in the home, while inverting the role of alcohol and banishing it from the religious landscape, both metaphorically and in practice. Even in the Southern Baptist example, it is through alcohol that women, and especially mothers, gain their power—not through the consumption or offering of alcohol, but through their denial and governance of alcohol. The marginality of both women and alcohol operate together in each of these three examples to offer an alternative economy—not of currency, but of power. Through the production, consumption, and even policing, of alcohol, women access alternate discourses of agency that capitalize on images of motherhood and death, inverting and/or challenging traditional, hierarchical, and patriarchal notions of life, morality, and afterlife.

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