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What Can Witchcraft Do in Mexico?

Alanna Cant

October 24, 2018

Although it rarely results in accusations, violence, or exclusion, witchcraft has implications for relations of power and authority in Mexican Catholicism.

In late September 2017, in the quiet days that followed the annual feast of the Holy Cross in Santa Cruz Mixtepec, Oaxaca, I found a coin in the mouth of Jesus Christ. The silvery five centavo piece was lodged in the open mouth of a large wooden statue of Christ carrying the cross, known locally as *El Dulce Nombre*. The statue was one of many antique figures in Santa Cruz's Catholic church and the ruined sixteenth century monastery next door, which was the focus of a heritage conservation project. This conservation project, in turn, was the focus of my own ethnographic research about the intersections of heritage and Catholic material religion in Mexico. I had not planned on dealing with witchcraft. As it turns out, however, witchcraft constantly surfaced as a theme in conversations and events around the church.



El Dulce Nombre. Alana Cant

When I discovered the coin, the sacristan of the church was irritated. He explained that people “mistreat” the sacred images by trying to use them in their *brujería* (witchcraft) in order to harness images’ power for selfish causes. He speculated that by placing the coin in Christ’s mouth, someone was attempting to prevent someone else from gossiping. Later, during that week’s mass, the parish priest used my discovery as a way to reprimand the congregation about *brujería* and other “superstitious” practices that he disapproved of. At first, I was concerned that his lecture would make my research participants wary of speaking with me, since the priest had claimed that I was reporting everything I learned back to him. However, they seemed to find it quite funny; one man even teased me, saying that

people would think that I had put the coin in the statue's mouth and start coming to me for my spells (*encantos*). In fact, while some people in Santa Cruz frequently express frustration and anxiety about witchcraft, individuals known to practice spells and fortune-telling are tolerated and are often considered by themselves and others to be devout Catholics. I was left puzzled about why Catholics in Santa Cruz Mixtepec seemed to simultaneously take *brujería* seriously and not seriously at all.



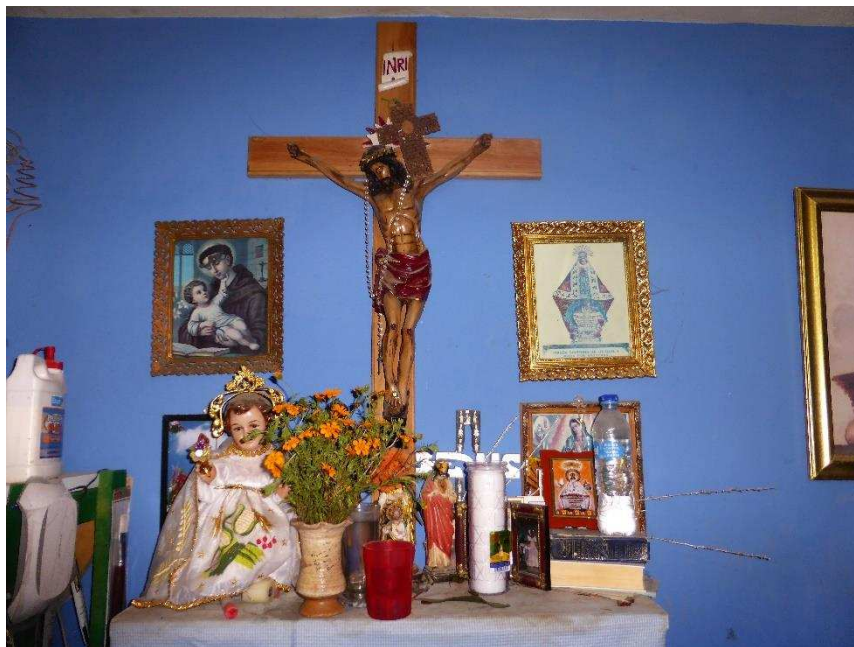
1The monastery cloister in Santa Cruz Mixtepec. Alanna Cant

It is, perhaps, because of this seeming lack of earnestness that Mexicanist anthropology has not made a substantial contribution to larger debates about the social effects of witchcraft. However, I believe it is worth thinking about what addressing witchcraft as a social mechanism can help us do in Mexico, and Latin America more generally. In Mexico, accusations of witchcraft rarely lead to violence or extreme social exclusion, unlike those areas of Africa, Asia, and Melanesia, where researchers have linked these dramatic effects to larger social structures of gender, power, and insecurity. Instead, research on Mexican *brujería* is generally approached from a Mesoamericanist perspective, focusing on its cultural meanings and historical significance for indigenous peoples in the Prehispanic, colonial, and contemporary periods. In this vein, Mexican witchcraft is more often analyzed within frameworks of [indigenous or folk cosmologies](#); illness and [traditional medicine](#); and novel devotions to nefarious characters like the [Santa Muerte](#) and Jesús Malverde.

Although these topics may be ethnographically connected to issues of violence and social transformation, they have not often contributed to general anthropological debates of how witchcraft works as a societal mode of dealing with social, moral, and political-economic ambiguity or change, of the sort exemplified by [Mary Douglas](#) and [Jean and John Comaroff](#). However, as [Anath Ariel de Vidas](#) has shown, witchcraft as a sociological analytic was employed in earlier periods of Anglophone Mexican ethnography, and it remains important in historical studies of [colonial Mexico](#), especially relating to issues of gender, ethnicity, and race. While the narratives and practices of [devil pacts](#) in Latin America have famously been shown to intercede in the economic and moral conflicts caused by emergent

capitalism, what the specific practices of *brujería* may be doing in Mexico today have not been fully explored.

In my own research, I have found it helpful to reflect on how witchcraft seems to mediate relations of power and authority within the larger framework of the Roman Catholic Church. In Santa Cruz Mixtepec, imagined or actual practices of *brujería* overlap with the material practices of Catholicism, both in its popular and more official formations. In particular, the belief in the immanence or “real presence” of saints in their statues and images allows Catholics to cultivate close, personal relationships with them through practices of care. Once such a relationship has been established, the saint may be petitioned for help in one’s predicaments and worries. However, there are also ways in which saints’ images may be used to force a desired outcome: turning a statue of Saint Anthony on his head, for example, can be used to find a romantic partner. Unlike more legitimate uses of saints’ images, however, this practice is thought to be detrimental to Saint Anthony’s well-being, and therefore he must also be appeased, otherwise he may take revenge on the person or their family for his mistreatment.



A household altar. Alanna Cant

Although such practices may be viewed as part and parcel of popular Catholicism, people in Santa Cruz distinguish between two forms: asking a saint to intercede on one’s behalf is a commonplace, everyday action, one that is encouraged by the parish priest and other official authorities of the Church. However, when saints’ images are used to magically effect, rather than humbly request, particular things, the authority of the Church and the power of the holy saint are called into question. As one research participant put it, warily, “I don’t know from where this power comes.” The possibility that individuals may channel illicit supernatural power through sanctioned (and sanctified) objects both reinforces *and* undermines the role of the Church as intermediary between believers and God. On the one hand, the idea that saints’ images are particularly efficacious for *brujería* works to sustain confidence in the Church’s doctrines of the true presence of the holy in Catholic material objects, a belief that today may

be challenged by protestant churches or non-religious authorities. On the other hand, uncertainty about the source of this efficacy means that the Church neither has exclusive access to the supernatural nor can wholly dictate the religious meanings and spiritual implications of engagement with such powers. That practitioners of *brujería* themselves are simultaneously ambivalent and nonchalant about using the saints in such ways underscores the mediating capacities of these practices. In a relatively peripheral community like Santa Cruz Mixtepec, *brujería* allows individuals to circumvent the Church's official control over the supernatural without undermining their commitment to the Catholic faith.

The continuing presence of *brujería* in Santa Cruz Mixtepec also works to mediate between the centralizing forces of the liturgical, doctrinal, and ritual systems of the Roman Catholic Church, and local practices of community-making and village-based identity. Villagers' own historical knowledge that Santa Cruz Mixtepec was a place notoriously difficult to evangelize in the seventeenth century, is frequently offered as an explanation of why such practices persist there. Rather than trying to distance themselves from this potentially shameful reputation, Catholics in Santa Cruz often recount it with glee, noting that their ancestors also resisted religious authority figures, much as they do with their own parish priest. While contemporary witchcraft in Santa Cruz Mixtepec does not necessarily lead to accusations, inquisitorial ritual, or high social drama, it nevertheless does do something.

Alanna Cant is a research fellow at the School of Anthropology and Conservation, University of Kent, United Kingdom. Her book *The Value of Aesthetics: Oaxacan Woodcarvers in Global Economies of Culture* will be published in 2019.

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