

Blessed are you Among Bandits: The Cross-Border Cult of Jesús Malverde

(19th-21st centuries)

Bendito tú eres entre todos los bandidos: el culto transfronterizo a Jesús Malverde

(siglos XIX-XXI)

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this article is to analyze the religious aspect of the drug trafficking culture, in particular, the devotion to the popular saint Jesus Malverde in Mexico between the 19th and 21st centuries. The guiding hypothesis is that the worship of this saint has been resignified since the 1970s as a response to a stronger repressive apparatus against drugs due to the increase in drug use in the United States. The Malverdian cult was adopted by the drug trafficking culture in the most ostensive way, and it has crossed geographic and cultural borders.

Keywords: 1. Jesús Malverde, 2. drug trafficking, 3. religiosity, 4. northern Mexico, 5. United States.

RESUMEN

El objeto de este artículo es analizar el aspecto de la religiosidad dentro de la cultura del narcotráfico, en especial, la devoción al santo popular Jesús Malverde en México, entre los siglos XIX y XXI. La hipótesis sostenida por este trabajo es que, a partir de la década de 1970, con el incremento del aparato represivo al combate a las drogas y el aumento del consumo por parte de Estados Unidos, la devoción al santo pasó por una resignificación. El culto a Malverde fue tanto adoptado por la cultura del narcotráfico del modo más ostensivo, como cruzó fronteras geográficas y culturales.

Palabras clave: 1. Jesús Malverde, 2. narcotráfico, 3. religiosidad, 4. norte de México, 5. Estados Unidos.

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INTRODUCTION

*'Bury me, gossips,' he murmured, faintly, 'where my arrow hath fallen.
There lay a green sod under my head and another beneath my feet [...].'
Robin Hood is dead, and no man can say truly where his grave may be.
His name lives in our ballads, our history, our hearts.*

Paul Creswick, *Robin Hood* (2017 [1957])

*Yo tengo fe en tu memoria y siempre me has protegido,
mis cargamentos me llegan sanos a Estados Unidos
por eso tú eres, Malverde, mi santito preferido.*

Los Cuates de Sinaloa, *Mi santito preferido* (2008)

His name and character will always be associated with the color green, the color of the forests where he would hide to commit robberies. In a time of misery and oppression, he took from the rich and gave to the poor. Social justice was the ultimate reason to justify his actions. Beloved by the helpless, his exploits came to be known in songs and poems. He was loathed by the authorities, who chased him and finally killed him. Popular worship arose after his death due to the miracles he granted to humble people. It is unknown whether the tomb where he is venerated today truly contains his mortal remains, but the fervor around his legend grows year after year as social and economic desolation prevail in the country. This devotion has crossed geographical and social boundaries. However, it was among his peers, bandits like him, that the thin line separating charity from corruption was eliminated, which brought this faith into the dangerous universe of drug trafficking. The name this character could well be Robin Hood, but in a chapel in the city of Culiacán, people revere a saint of such nature named Jesús Malverde.

The purpose of the present article is to analyze the devotion to Jesús Malverde, a specific cult within the universe of religious beliefs and practices associated with drug trafficking. Our hypothesis is that, as a result of the increased intensity of the repressive apparatus of the war on drugs since the 1970s, the devotion to this saint was resignified and ostensibly adopted by the drug trafficking culture.² It is important to mention that

²It is important to clarify that Jesús Malverde is not revered only by those who identify themselves with the criminal world; the saint was worshipped by people of different classes and social strata since its origins during the Porfirio Díaz administration and long before the expansion of the narco culture. However, we will focus on the worship as practiced by drug traffickers since our purpose is to study the devotion within this subculture. Similarly, the existence of cults centered on various saints not recognized by the Catholic orthodoxy in the northern Mexican border is well known, but the scope of this study is limited to the figure of Jesús Malverde due to his origins as a popular bandit.

Operation Condor, carried out jointly between the governments of Mexico and the United States in the early 1970s, was an emblematic and ambitious strategy: its goal was to repress drug production and trade. From then on, religious manifestations centered on Malverde were recreated to support the growing culture of drug trafficking, which since then assumed a cross-border quality. This might well be one of the reasons that justified the surge of religious fervor around the character. Thus, to adequately understand this cultural phenomenon, it was necessary to adopt a broader chronological perspective. The period covered by this essay begins at the end of the nineteenth century, when the legend originated, still during the Porfirio Díaz administration (1876-1911); then we discuss the transformation of the cult in the 1970s and 1980s, when the saint began to be worshipped outside Mexico, and finally, we focus on more recent twenty-first century expressions.

The first part of the article addresses the sociocultural production of the Malverdian myth, its historical origins, its relationship with the official Church, and its role in the Mexican popular imagination. We then analyze the socio-cultural conditions that allowed for the adoption of the cult by drug traffickers and the relevant historical conditions of the 20th century, especially the escalation of drug use in Mexico and the United States, the role of policy to face this problem, some aspects of the Malverdian faith that have crossed geographical and cultural borders, as well as an outline of the profile of the criminals who worship the saint. Finally, the article reflects on the emergence of the narcocorrido as a subgenre of the traditional Mexican corrido, which represents different ways in which narco spirituality is expressed and helps to understand of the religious phenomenon of the faith in Jesús Malverde more deeply. Oral tradition, novenas, and narcocorridos are the primary documentary sources of this essay: our intention is to determine the main attributes with which the saint-bandit is associated in the drug trafficking universe, seeking to identify the types of miracles and advantages associated with the character. The historical categories of representation and identity are employed to analyze how music and faith become a symbolic language of violence and become a fundamental part of the worldview of crime in Mexico and across its borders.

*VOY A CANTAR UN CORRIDO/ DE LA HISTORIA VERDADERA/
DE UN BANDIDO GENEROSO/ QUE ROBABA DONDE QUIERA*

The drug trafficking universe encompasses both the highest levels of society, generally considered as the main consumers of drugs, and the most economically fragile population sectors. In Mexico, the second group is composed of farmers devoid of resources, unemployed urban workers, displaced indigenous people, and inhabitants of high-risk and violent zones, both in urban and rural contexts. These people coexist closely with the reality of drug trafficking and, for many, this activity represents income to sustain their families. The cult of Jesús Malverde is embedded in this social logic of exclusion, and its

construction is the result of a complex cultural amalgam, whose uncertain origins can be traced to the formation of the Mexican national identity itself. It is interesting to see that the different books on Malverdian devotion have great difficulty in proving the existence of the historical character. The sources of the myth dwell in the typical shadows of folk tales. This lack of substance is clearly because the story is based, mostly, on oral tradition, on accounts of witnesses who personally met Malverde, or were his friends, or somehow knew of the existence of a certain generous bandit sometimes associated with the name Jesús Juárez Mazzo, of whom a birth certificate dated March 5, 1888, was reportedly found in Sinaloa (Ortiz Castillo, 2012, p. 84).³ However, this historical evidence is not an acceptable guarantee of authenticity. According to José Ramón Ortiz Castillo, Malverde's birthplace is impossible to ascertain, although it is assumed that he was born in Sinaloa or migrated to this state at some point. His choice of a criminal life would have been a product of the poverty in which he lived during his childhood, a period that scarred him forever as he saw his parents starve to death (Ortiz Castillo, 2012, p.2).

The imaginary around this character is rooted in the asymmetric socioeconomic relationships of Porfirian Sinaloa (Gómez Michel & Park, 2014, p. 204), and the mythical story of Malverde as a social bandit coincides with the effervescence prior to the Mexican Revolution (1910), a period marked by insurrection against Porfirio Díaz (1830-1915), such as the Tomóchic Rebellion, in Chihuahua; for these authors, Malverde's life took place in the context of modernization brought by the Díaz administration, whose market internationalization projects opened the door to American companies, especially railroad construction firms, and resulted in the expropriation of land from many rural communities in Sinaloa, which were suddenly dispossessed and forced into poverty (Gómez Michel & Park, 2014, p. 205).

The Porfirian ideals of order and progress created a marginalized social class, facilitating people's identification with the cult to Malverde as a result of their vulnerability in the modernizing context. This is clearly reflected by the first miracle attributed to this soul (ánima), spirit, entity or, more commonly, saint. But first, it will be necessary to make a brief digression to describe the conditions of his death.⁴ According to current accounts, after a life devoted to helping the miserable with the spoils of his thefts and openly challenging the local authorities, he fell in love with the daughter of Governor Francisco Cañedo, and the official decided to put a price on the bandit's head. In 1909, more specifically on May 3, he was captured by the police; this day is at present dedicated to

³It should be mentioned that Malverde's date of birth is also unclear, but most historians consider 1870 as the year of his birth. The documentary research behind the present essay found that 1870 is the most accurate year to place Malverde's birth.

⁴We have intentionally omitted a specific bibliographic reference to this story since the same account can be found in oral tradition and secondary sources, and the literature review found few variations on the circumstances of Malverde's death.

Malverde. The saint was ambushed in the green mountain range after which he was named, betrayed by a partner who let himself be seduced by the reward money.⁵

When he was hung, his body was publicly exposed as an example to others, and he was denied proper burial. Shortly after that, a poor peasant who had lost part of his livestock, that is, his only source of income, came by and asked the hanging bandit for help in finding his animals. It is said that, despite never having performed miracles in his life,⁶ Malverde's spirit promptly helped the peasant, which caused the miraculous fame of the good-natured thief to spread throughout the region. The place where Malverde died became a pilgrimage center. This is where his remains were supposed to be, and the first worshipers used to place rocks, one at a time, as a gesture of gratitude for received miracles. Due to the numerous prodigies attributed to the thief's soul, the stones formed a small cave that soon became a chapel. A church in Culiacán, Sinaloa, is believed to be such place and the center of his miraculous power—a visit to this city is essential if a true miracle is expected. Ortiz Castillo highlights that much of the current worship in this space is due to Eligio González León (? -2004), first chaplain of the temple, who idealized the place and maintained it for 30 years after having been saved by the saint in a shooting in the 1970s, an event that will be addressed in the next section (Ortiz Castillo, 2012, p. 86 and p. 104).

Malverde's cult is clearly among what Kristín Guðrún Jónsdóttir (2014) has called the Mexican profane book of saints, and Ortiz Castillo (2012), the cosmogony of para-Catholic saints. That is to say, Jesús Malverde is one of several popular characters worshipped independently of the figures of worship accepted by Catholicism; their almost folkloric symbolism has a spiritual role in the Mexican popular imaginary. According to Guðrún (2014), the adoration of Malverde and saints such as Teresa Urrea, Pedro Jaramillo, Niño Fidencio, and Juan Soldado share a series of characteristics. Each one, in their own way, acts in response to the prevailing unequal order; they emerge in definite geographic spaces, in relatively recent times, and in circumstances known to the devotee, all of which facilitates the worshiper's identification with the characters. These cults flourish on the margins of the Catholic Church; however, their model of worship is still Catholic because the devotees pray to the saints and their images are kissed as a sign of devotion, pilgrims visit the sacred place bringing votive offerings, and promises are fulfilled, among other shared expressions (Guðrún, 2014, pp. 46-48).

⁵Another version claims that he was shot by the police forces that had been unleashed after him, but he managed to survive and flee to the mountains, where he refused to die in order to increase the price on his head and thus benefit more people with the additional money. He asked a compadre to turn him in when his death was imminent and use the money to help the poor (Genis, 2017, p. 80).

⁶Historians' opinions diverge on this point. José Genis asserts that Malverde's fame was mainly due to miraculous gifts that allowed him to change his appearance and gave him the power of ubiquity (Genis, 2017, p. 79).

These manifestations lead to the question about the relationship between popular worship and the official Church. Despite the myriad miracles attributed to Malverde, as evidenced by the countless number of votive offerings, tiles, altarpieces, and paintings on the wall of his chapel in Culiacán, the Catholic Church opted not to canonize him, for obvious reasons, such as the lack of evidence of its real existence and an oral history that has recounted his hardly laudable adventures for generations—as put by Park (2007), if he had really existed, his life would not be exemplary, so Malverde’s devotion became an apocryphal cult. The tensions and idiosyncrasies of the relationship between the popular cult and the Church can be identified in an anecdote that appears in the documentary “El mito santificado,” produced by El Colegio de la Frontera Norte (Colef) and presented in February 2016. The documentary describes how the devotees tried to take a priest for the opening mass in the Culiacán chapel on May 3, Malverde’s holy day. However, the local church declined. The devotees refused to accept that and offered a tip to the priest, who accepted it, and thus they managed to have their first mass in the sacred place (Valenzuela Arámburo, 2013, 28’02”-28’25” min). The story is a clear expression of the incongruities between the official stance of the Church and the practices of priests, who experience the everyday reality of high-risk communities and are often involved with the criminal world.

Despite the lack of support from the Church, the Malverdian worship adapted Catholic codes to its religious practices so that worshippers could have access to spiritual support as that granted by official rites. It is striking that, even though the faithful are aware of the lack of recognition by the Catholic hierarchy, their full experiencing of faith is unaffected. In this sense, Malverde’s own novena is a heroic record on the arduous struggle against the official powers—the Church and the government—to support the cult in Culiacán:

Tercer día: ¡Ay Malverde! El Vaticano no creyó que fueras santo y no quiso canonizarte. Pero cuando entraron las máquinas de Caterpillar a derribar tu capilla. Rompiste una máquina y nadie pudo quitarte de donde estabas. Y rompiste otra y los que no te respetaban enmudecieron. Y rompiste la tercera y entonces dijeron: “dejen en paz la capilla de Malverde.” Así como no pudieron contigo, haz que los que me amenazan no puedan conmigo (Capilla de Jesús Malverde, s/f).

In addition to these historical considerations, we ought to consider the Mexican cultural imaginary as the basis of the myth, a national version of the universal archetype of the outlaw-hero. Versions of this criminal driven by justice and become national hero exist in different parts of the world, based on real or fictional characters: Robin Hood in England; Virgulino Ferreira, the Lampião, in Brazil; Jesse James in the United States, as well as many others. *Bandits*, Eric Hobsbawm’s (1969) classic work, is an almost mandatory reference for researchers when it comes to studying the figure of the marginal who fights for social justice. Hobsbawm has identified similar stories throughout Europe, America, Asia, and Africa and conceptualized the idea of the social bandit as a rural outlaw, considered as a criminal by the Lord and the State, but who continues to be part of the

peasant society and is considered by his people as a hero, a champion, an avenger and a paladin of justice, a leader of liberation, and so on (Hobsbawm, 1969, p. 9). According to the author, the main characteristics of the social bandit can be summarized in nine points: he embraces marginal life not due to a crime but as a victim of injustice; he corrects wrongdoings against his group; he robs the rich to give to the poor; he never kills, except to defend himself or to execute just revenge; if he survives, he returns to his people as an honest citizen and member of the community; he is admired, helped, and protected by the people; invariably, his death involves treason; he is, in theory, invisible and invulnerable; and finally, his enemy is not a distant ruler but the local authority (Hobsbawm, 1969, p. 37). These nine points apply perfectly to the tradition of the outlaw-hero personified by Jesus Malverde.

On the other hand, it is important to consider the Mexicanness underlying the figure of Malverde. Gudrún emphasizes that the figure of the bandit has penetrated deep into the Mexican folk culture, both in oral tradition and iconography, as revealed by the outfit worn by charros and mariachi band musicians, a typically Mexican costume favored by hacendados, outlaws, and the nineteenth century rurales: narrow trousers and bolero style jacket decorated with silver braids and buttons topped by a wide-brimmed hat (Gudrún, 2014, P. 59). The Colef documentary film mentioned above presents a quite revealing vision on the frequently pointed out association of Malverde's image with symbols of the Mexican cultural imaginary, such as actor Pedro Infante (1917-1957) and singer Vicente Fernández (1940). The sculptor who created the best-known image of the saint by request of Eligio González León, Sergio Flores, is interviewed in the documentary. The chapel fonder's son, Jesús Manuel González Sánchez, states that his father had been shown Malverde's picture, and therefore he wanted to have a bust made for the chapel resembling Pedro Infante or Mariscal, a well-known politician, because they were cherished by the people (Valenzuela Arámburo, 2013, 16'50"-17'05" min). Flores confessed that, after having spoken with people who called themselves contemporaries of Malverde, he decided to disregard such accounts in his work because he found no points of agreement on what the real Malverde looked like. The artist indicates that he did not choose a specific model because he wanted to make the sculpture resemble the average man of the region, trying to convey the feel of a confident, forward-looking person, who is nevertheless kind to his people. The sculptor indicates that he intended to give the sculpture an attractive character, yet not too handsome, and that he felt the need to represent a prototype of the ideal Sinaloan, bearing a level gaze that lacked arrogance. Flores adds that Malverde was the opposite of timid; a very intelligent, bold, and fearless man (Valenzuela Arámburo, 2013, 17'12"- 19'20" min).

The result was the famous image depicting the black-haired bandit wearing a black mustache and a black tie. Surprisingly, it was until 1973, when the chapel of Malverde was created, when the saint acquired his definite image, and today's iconography in baseball

hats, shirts, key rings, medals, scapulars, amulets of all kinds, and even a beer brand, is based on sheer artistic imagination.

*QUE MALVERDE ES MILAGROSO/ OTRA VEZ SE HA COMPROBADO/
POS LA CARGA EN SAN ANTONIO/ YA SE ENCUENTRA EN EL MERCADO/
Y EL JOVEN EN CULIACÁN/ OTRO VIAJE HA PREPARADO*

The saint-bandit can be conceived as a symbol of resistance created by society's underdogs in the face of an oppressive world and a social order of exclusion. The idea of the symbolic inversion of relationships and established hierarchies, analyzed by James Scott in his work *Domination and the arts of resistance* (2000), can help to understand the Malverdian myth. As put by Ortiz Castillo (2012, p. 9), the fact that the outlaw-hero is revered by people from low social strata is a clear expression of dissatisfaction with the hegemonic discourse of the social elite and an attempt to regard crime as moral restoration in a context of marginalization and poverty. When analyzing the worship of Jesús Malverde under this light, the cultural adoption of his image by the drug trafficking universe becomes logical and easier to understand. In this regard, if the veneration of the character arose for the first time in the historical context of exclusionary modernization promoted by Porfirio Díaz, the re-elaboration of the Malverdian cult since the 1970s coincides with a new period of social vulnerability due to globalization. The crisis of contemporary times allows for a re-edition of the plot: the poor, in their desire to be part of the progress, are unable to achieve prosperity except through drug trafficking. According to Gómez Michel and Park (2014, p. 209), Malverde represents the political and spiritual resistance of a sector that has been historically excluded from the national project and has been led by its lack of opportunities or alternatives to developing close complicity with criminal activity.

The foremost question when studying Jesus Malverde's cult has to do with the origins of his association with the universe of drug trafficking—as demonstrated above, this devotion is prior to any connection thereof. The most common historiographic response to understanding the relationship between Malverde and drug traffickers can be found in a typically Mexican tradition: the *compadrazgo*. According to José Genis, Mexico has a class of social relationships characterized by their not being based on consanguinity or marriage, but on certain religious rituals that support diverse social institutions and provide meaning to symbolic systems—ritual kinship and *compadrazgo* are the most widespread of these relationships (Genis, 2017, p. 77). For Gómez Michel and Park (2014, p. 209), the idea of a saintly bandit who is “one of us” brings Malverde closer to an earthly plane, which facilitates social relations among those who identify with him and share his mythical criminal status. The *padrino* emerges as a mafioso who offers material support to his faithful when facing a situation of vulnerability, and Malverde can be said to fulfill the same role, but on the spiritual level.

If God and the other Catholic saints are far away, in heaven, Malverde the saint is near, he knows each one of his countrymen and governs their daily fortunes. For this reason, it should be borne in mind that, when Malverde began to be worshipped, the *santón* was regarded as a protector of the poor and the miserable of rural northern Mexico, where many peasants worked as low-level gomeros (poppy field laborers). These anonymous drug traffickers prayed the saint for many different favors: protection during their drug smuggling, an abundant marijuana harvest, selling all of their production, escaping from dangerous or violent situations, and protection against premature death, among others (Genis, 2017, pp. 79-80; Gómez Michel & Park, 2014, pp. 208-209). In short, Jesús Malverde was a saint of practical and everyday life, and he was initially associated with small-scale drug dealing. For his devotees linked to the criminal world, the main miracles of the saint are in the sphere of protection and safeguard during routine criminal activities. Malverde does not invite a moral condemnation of his believers, but rather a relationship of spiritual *compadrazgo*: he is a bandit as much as any other, who understands the harshness of the criminal life and the harsh social reality experienced by his faithful, which facilitates the contact with the sacred and allows for closer look at the dangerous context in which criminals live, especially drug traffickers.

However, as often happens in the relationship between a sponsor and a protégé, Malverde's protection requires a consideration. It is important to say that the most common forms of gratitude reported above are not so dissimilar to the official forms of gratitude offered to Catholic saints, such as lighting a candle for the saint or bringing donations, votive offerings, or large multicolored flower bouquets. However, there are additional practices in the cult. In the first place, the almost obligatory need to visit his chapel in Culiacán, considered a sacred space of spiritual force, capable of producing miracles. Secondly, it is important to help someone in a problematic situation that the devotee can relate to, which in the drug trafficking universe represents a fairly significant compensation. Finally, since he is known to be a very happy *santón*, having music composed for him would be the most obvious form of praise, hence the innumerable narcocorridos in his honor, as will be described in the following section. As expressed by Krauthausen (1988), Malverde's novena is also useful to understand his identification as a spiritual godfather, reflected by requests of criminal order typical of Hobbesian spaces of free for all struggle:

Quinto día: ¡Bienaventurado seas, Malverde! Dios te perdonó y te permitió seguir ayudando a la gente que acude a ti. Anima de Malverde, yo te prometo que, si tú me ayudas, yo a mi vez ayudaré a alguien en tu nombre para que tu culto siga creciendo y tu fortaleza siga siendo la fortaleza de los que te invocan. Tú que sabes cómo me encuentro construye a mi alrededor una fortaleza invencible.

Sexto día: ¡Flores para ti, Malverde! A ti te gustan las flores. En tu capilla siempre las hay de todos los colores. Flores que la gente te lleva en agradecimiento y que tú las recibes con la humildad con que siempre trataste

a la gente y con la bondad que adorno tu corazón. ¡Envuélveme en el aroma de tus flores y rodéame con los colores de sus pétalos para que me confunda con el bosque y con el cerro para que los que me persiguen no me atrapen!

Séptimo día: Música para ti. ¡Oh, Malverde! Eres alegre. Alegre es tu corazón. Nunca la tristeza, ni el temor te doblegaron. ¡Música de banda! Que te toquen “El Sinaloense” y que tus oídos se llenen de sus notas y que tus pensamientos y tu alegría contagien el ambiente. Rodéame con tú música, que no haya ruidos que me delaten. ¡Haz que toquen fuerte para protegerme! (Capilla de Jesús Malverde, s/f).

The essential issue to be addressed concerning the worship of Jesus Malverde's *anima* is to understand when this quotidian protector of a handful of petty drug dealers and *gomeros* from Sinaloa became the transnational patron of drug lords. Gómez Michel and Park claim that his transformation into a ‘narco-saint’ reflects the integration of the northern Mexico drug smuggling business into the global market (2014, p. 202); nevertheless, although we agree with the theory of these South Korean authors, we consider that the answer to this question requires an in-depth digression, since it involves narco religiosity in connection with the history of drug trafficking in Mexico and, by necessary addition, in the United States. Within the chronological scope of this article, the social phenomenon of drugs in Mexico is first observed during the Porfiriato. According to Luis Astorga, opium and its compounds, as well as coca wine and marijuana, were used legitimately and regularly in this period as conventional products of the Mexican pharmacopeia (Astorga, 2016, p. 15). At the time when the alleged historical Malverde lived, in the Sinaloa of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, drunkenness and fights were the most common causes of admission to prison, but rarely the consumption of marijuana, opium and its derivatives, or cocaine. Headlines about marijuana or white poppy were usually concerned with the social use of these narcotics among soldiers, prisoners, wealthy people or underdogs, artists, and very often with the Chinese minority in connection with opium (Astorga, 2016, p. 51).

In the 1930s, increased consumption turned the issue into a matter of public health; as a result, the Mexican criminal code of 1931 considered drug trafficking and drug addiction as federal crimes (Astorga, 2016, p. 43). However, it was also in this decade when the association between production in Mexico and consumption in the United States became more open. It is since this moment that drug sales and consumption became inseparable from the cross-border relationships between both countries and a characteristic feature of their diplomatic affairs and shared public health and security policies. In this regard, the involvement of Harry Jacob Anslinger (1892-1975), first Federal Bureau of Narcotics (FBN) commissioner, was fundamental in the efforts against production, sales, and consumption, especially of marijuana, in the United States, which brought direct consequences to Mexico. Supported by FBN, instituted on August 12, 1930, Anslinger

undertook the task with an iron fist and strong influence in the US Congress during the long 32 years in which he served as head of the Bureau. His national policy to combat drugs highlighted the role of Mexico in the propagation of *cannabis* consumption and sales, which spurred the association of illegal drugs with Mexican immigrants and the way of life of their country, which was reflected by notoriously racial tones in politics.⁷ Concerning the use of marihuana in the United States, the 1932 FBN report indicates that:

This abuse of the drug is noted among the Latin-American or Spanish-speaking population. The sale of cannabis cigarettes occurs to a considerable degree in States along the Mexican border and in cities of the Southwest and West, as well as in New York City and, in fact, wherever there are settlements of Latin Americans (Musto, 2017, p. 428)

Anslinger's stood for his policies with extreme determination, he believed that zero tolerance would lead to victory over addiction, and he was responsible for the ban on marijuana to acquire federal status via the *Marijuana Tax Act* of 1937, which limited its use to medical and industrial applications. However, these health and safety policies were ineffectual to halt the increase in drug use in the United States. Mexico's role in this growth was undeniable. By the end of the 1950s, Sinaloa was already responsible for the production of three-quarters of the marihuana introduced into the United States, but it would be until 1960s that the consumption of the plant would become generalized in the country (Astorga, 2016, pp. 51-53 and p.100). Such increase was especially noticeable among high school and college students: in 1962, only 4% of adults between the ages of 18 and 25 had tried marijuana, whereas 13% had in 1967; the use of heroin increased too (Toro, 1995, p. 15). Also in this decade, 75% to 80% of all marijuana and heroin in southern California had been smuggled through the Mexican border (Astorga, 2016, p. 111).

Early in the 1970s, Mexico had already become the largest drug producer and trader, and the country was responsible for 95% of the marijuana and 87% of the heroin entering its northern neighbor (Toro, 1995, pp. 16-17). As a result, the United States exerted greater pressure on internal drug control in Mexico, and the State and bureaucratic apparatus increased with the creation of the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) in July 1973 by President Richard Nixon with the purpose of establishing a unique command for the global war on the threat of drugs.⁸ The DEA has had regional offices in Mexico since 1974, the first of which conducted military-style operations against drug trafficking and money

⁷Afro-descendants and Latin Americans were the most affected racial minorities as a result of the policy against drugs in the United States (Courtwright, 1992).

⁸Different departments were merged, especially as a result of the transformation of the *Bureau of Narcotics and Dangerous Drugs* (BNDD), derived from the FBN (DEA, s/f).

laundering in support of Mexican police authorities.⁹ Through the DEA, the United States began to intervene directly in transnational missions in the border once Mexico was proven incapable of facing the problem without support from the north. The ineffective actions of the Mexican state in producer states such as Durango and Sinaloa were, according to María Celia Toro, responsible for the proliferation of armed violence among peasants and traffickers (powerful narcos, such as the infamous Cochiloco, began to emerge at this time), and thus the inability to contain the drug market in the country was confirmed (Toro, 1995, pp. 16-17). This state of desolation opened the door to what would be the most ambitious operation to eradicate drug trade and production: Operación Condor.¹⁰

Executed between 1976 and 1977, the operation was aimed at the eradication of marijuana and opium fields, the blockade of narcotics trafficking, and the dismemberment of criminal organizations (Revista Nexos, 1978). The US government provided aerial photography equipment, communication devices, helicopters, and training for Mexican pilots responsible for spraying the fields with herbicides. Mexico, on the other hand, provided military troops, as well as financing for most of the expenses: a total of 35 million dollars (Toro, 1995, p. 18). The main area covered by the operation was the triangle of three northern states: Chihuahua, Durango, and Sinaloa. As a result of the program, drug shipments to the United States decreased drastically: nearly 6,000 hectares of marijuana were destroyed, and 12,000 hectares of opium were seized, as well as 3,800 tons of drugs (Toro, 1995, p. 18). Despite its success in terms of tactical engineering and bilateral cooperation, the main shortcomings of the operation resulted in a reorganization of drug production: it was scattered over the territory, smaller fields were planted, and the use of herbicides was rendered useless. This reorganization affected other crops and producers unrelated drugs, and it led to environmental damage and, especially, the formation of transnational cartels. As a result, the early 1980s were characterized by the recovery of Mexican drug production for consumption in the United States and a large-scale increase in violence on both sides of the conflict in the context of the radical zero tolerance policy.

This digression on the anti-drug policy in Mexico is necessary because it allows for a deeper understanding of the Malverdian phenomenon in the current context of drug trafficking. The cult crossed two frontiers in the 1970s. In the first place, the social frontier; as drug production peaked in Mexico, the denizens of the world of crime became the typical devotees of the saint: petty drug dealers, marihuana farmers, and the rich, powerful, and influential drug lords. In the second place, physical and geographical boundaries were

⁹Currently, there are six DEA regional offices: Mexico City, Guadalajara, Hermosillo, Mazatlán, Mérida, and Monterrey (Embajada de Estados Unidos en México, s/f).

¹⁰There were previous operations, such as Operación Interceptación (1959) and Operación Cooperación (1969), but these they caused diplomatic conflicts between the Mexican and US governments, deteriorated cross-border relationships, and prevented the progress of more effective policies against drugs.

erased because the globalization of the drug markets promoted a supranational cultural dynamic. For Mexico and the United States, the issue took a dramatic turn due to political tension and debate over how to manage anti-drug policies, in addition to the phenomenon of illegal immigration of Mexicans to the neighboring country. In this regard, Ortiz Castillo emphasizes the role of the transnationalization of cultural objects to new economic and social contexts, which, in the case of Malverde, allowed for the creation of cross-border religiosity and a new form of spirituality related to the most immediate problem: how to cross the border illegally, whether to work honestly or to carry out illicit business (2012, pp. 17-19).

The vertiginous growth of Malverde's cult in the 1970s is not, therefore, casual. Eligio González León,¹¹ already mentioned in this essay, modernized the adoration of the saint-bandit, probably at a historical moment when there was a growing social demand for spiritual protection in an inflection context. Strategically, González León located the chapel in the traditional narco zone of northern Mexico, the so-called golden triangle comprised by Chihuahua, Durango, and Sinaloa; today, the chapel receives donations in pesos, but also in dollars, euros, jewelry, and precious metals (Valenzuela Arámburo, 2013, 23'11 " - 23'25 "min.). Gudrún reports that, when asked about the association between the saint-bandit and drug traffickers, González León used to say that a soul like Malverde's made no distinctions concerning the occupation of the person asking for help; the narcos identified themselves with him only because he was a bandit, but testimonies of miracles are delivered by all kinds of people (Gudrún, 2014, p 185). According to Pamela Bunker, Liza Campbell, and Robert Bunker (2010, p.164), the fact that famous drug traffickers born in Sinaloa, such as Rafael Caro Quintero (1952), Amado Carrillo Fuentes (1956-1997), and Joaquín "El Chapo" Guzmán (1957) visited the chapel to pay homage to the saint reinforces the idea that the cult of Malverde continues growing.¹²

It is also necessary to address the reaction to Malverde's worship on the other side of the border and the way in which it came to the attention of American authorities, for whom the possession of any image or paraphernalia associated with Jesús Malverde is sufficient indication of connection with drug trafficking. Malverde's first and closest association with

¹¹González León's devotion is likely connected to the universe of crime—the narcocorrido entitled *Corrido de Eligio González León*, by Lino Valladares, tells of the tragic day when the chaplain was shot and wounded in his car, which is why he was taken to Tierra Blanca, a place identified by Astorga, in the 1970s, as a "no man's land", mostly inhabited by gomeros and gunmen who were said to share beer with the police (Astorga, 2016, p. 126; Ortiz Castillo, 2012, p. 223).

¹²In the case of Chapo Guzmán, our literature review was unable to identify any plausible evidence of ostensive devotion to the saint in the Culiacán chapel. Moreover, accounts of Guzmán's attitude toward Malverde are located in the area of what is seen/said and what is not seen/not said, that is, in the mist of oral tradition; therefore, attesting this drug lord's praise to the saint is complicated.

drug trafficking began in the 1970s, when the packages in many drug shipments smuggled into the United States were found to present Malverde's decal (Bunker, Campbell & Bunker, 2010, p. 164). Robert Botsch's article in the 2008 FBI Law Enforcement Bulletin reports on an event that reflects the connection quite dramatically. In October 2002, in Nebraska, after a routine check on a car, the police located 2 kg of amphetamines and a cell phone with Malverde's image. The driver and the passenger, both from Sinaloa, were imprisoned. In court, the defense argued that the image of the saint was not sufficient evidence to link the case to drug trafficking. However, the lower court judge considered that the simple act of carrying the image of Malverde was proof of the connection with the trafficking of drugs from Sinaloa to the United States.¹³ Another example is from the city of Bakersfield, California; in 2006, in a survey administered to people in prison, 80% of Mexican-origin inmates involved in drug trafficking declared being worshipers of Malverde (Bunker, Campbell & Bunker, 2010, p.164).

We will close this section by analyzing the nature of the faith practiced by drug traffickers in order to understand their devotion to Malverde more deeply. As mentioned above, Malverde's devotion is prior to its adoption by the world of drug traffickers, but it assumed greater proportions with the emergence and role of drug lords operating transnationally at the end of the twentieth century. On the other hand, it must be emphasized that Malverde's cult is not associated with Satanism, nor with tragic deaths like beheading, massacres, or torture within the narco universe. The previously mentioned article by Bunker, Campbell, and Bunker establishes differences in regard to the levels of violence associated with narco-cults. For these authors, the cult of Jesus Malverde and other Catholic or folkloric saints is at an intermediate point in which devotees are classified as tolerant because they tend not to commit acts of extreme violence (Bunker, Campbell & Bunker, 2010, p. 161). The most violent end of the scale is exemplified by intolerant and zealot groups such as the La Familia cartel, based in the state of Michoacán, and malevolent intolerant groups associated with Satanism, Santeria, and witchcraft, for whom violence knows no limits. Members of La Familia display an openly conservative character based on the Christian evangelical tradition; it is controlled by charismatic and authoritarian leaders, and strict rules must be followed (the use of alcohol and drugs is prohibited). The violence that they exert is considered to be divine justice—traitors must be eliminated (Bunker, Campbell & Bunker, 2010, pp. 169-171). The most representative cult associated with malevolent crime today is that of the Santa Muerte, another devotion present before the emergence of narco culture and absorbed by it. Numerous incidents involving torture and beheading in Mexico are associated with the cult of the Santa Muerte in the context of drug trafficking; this theme requires further studies (Bunker, Campbell & Bunker, 2010,

¹³In the courts of California, Kansas, Nebraska, and Texas any object bearing the figure of Malverde is considered admissible evidence in criminal cases related to drugs or money laundering.

pp. 165-167). The adoration of Jesus Malverde is, therefore, a conciliatory aspect of the narco faith, closer to the idea of generosity and complicity in the criminal context—a “bandit like ourselves” who provides a practical and immediate response to a daily circumstance requiring just a pinch of good fortune.

JESÚS MALVERDE/ VENGO A CANTARTE/EN MIS CANTARES GRACIAS TE DOY

We would like to conclude this essay by emphasizing the Malverdian oral tradition captured by narcocorridos, a form of Mexican corrido concerned with the drug trafficking context. Although tracing the origin of corridos is beyond the scope of the present essay, it is important to indicate that, whether derived from Spanish romance or pre-Hispanic chants, corridos are a type of popular art that represents the Mexican cultural mestizaje—a musical production identified with the most impoverished population sectors in a specific local reality. Alberto Lira-Hernández explains that corridos relay a series of events around realities known by the lyricists, but the structure of such realities is not static nor is it repetitive, and it intends to communicate a collective experience, without academic pretensions (Lira-Hernández, 2013, p. 32). Therefore, its functions are many since it acts as: a communication and dissemination channel for certain factions; a vehicle for the social reproduction of cultural values and codes of certain groups; a newspaper for the illiterate; a pedagogical instrument; a mechanism to deride one’s enemies, and a platform for public opinion formation and propaganda (Lira-Hernández, 2013, pp. 34-39). José Manuel Valenzuela Arce indicates that the historical tradition of corridos is comprised of phases in which it has been nearly forgotten and other phases in which it has reemerged in new forms, the newest of these being the narcocorrido, the predominant style in the ever more numerous contemporary productions (Valenzuela Arce, 2003, p. 47).

An analysis of the different dimensions of this poetical and musical form of expression attests the role of this tradition within the drug trafficking world as a mechanism of social integration capable of creating cohesion and identity in the face of an increasingly oppressive and exclusionary social reality that presents itself in multiple ways (poverty, migration, economic dissatisfaction, state violence, police aggression, conflict among peers, foreign status, quotidian drug-associated issues, etc.). However, it is important to emphasize that narcocorridos are not a new invention. According to Juan Carlos Ramírez Pimienta, the first corrido about drug trafficking, entitled “Carga Blanca”, was composed by Manuel Cuéllar Valdez in the 1940s; it tells a story of treason concerning a drug shipment, possibly morphine or cocaine, and it is still sung in cantinas along the border (Narváez, 2017).¹⁴ But the rebirth of corridos in the 1970s coincides with the increase in international drug trafficking. In 1973, Los Tigres del Norte released “Contrabando y

¹⁴We also recommend the book by Juan Carlos Ramírez-Pimienta, “*Cantar a los narcos. Voces y versos del narcocorrido*”, published by Editorial Planeta in 2011.

Traición,” a joyful song that celebrates the adventurous life of drug smuggling; traffickers are depicted as the new idols of a poetical lyric expressing the desire for social ascent shared by a whole subordinate population layer. The narcocorridos dedicated to Jesus Malverde narrate the life and miracles of a folkloric saint; therefore, they have been identified by Ortiz Castillo as para-Catholic hagiographies—these songs are clearly intended to present the bandit as a hero who transgresses the rule of an exploitation system.

Although these corridos are often focused on factual aspects of Malverde’s life or on his prodigies, they also portray other themes, characteristic of narcocorridos in general, such as the bandit’s courage as a product of necessity; hunger, which forces brave men to risk their lives to improve the living conditions of their families; the mandate of loyalty and courage for social mobility in drug trafficking; treachery and unbreakable codes; the vindication of drugs, and the cross-border life of wealth provided by criminal life and drug contraband, among others. The following examples of narcocorridos dedicated to Malverde highlight the ideology that supports the shared values of this universe:

Le [a Jesús Malverde] preguntaba el teniente
“¿Con que fin andas robando?”
No robo porque me guste,
Tampoco me estoy rajando,
Me duele ver inocentes
Que de hambre andan llorando.

El bandido generoso I

(Ortiz Castillo, 2012, pp. 210-211).

No te me rajés, Malverde,
Que ya vamos a llegar,
Antes de entrar a Sonora,
Es el retén federal,
Traigo en la troca clavados
Treinta kilos de cristal [...]
“¿De dónde viene señor?”
Me preguntó el comandante.
Le dije, “vengo de Mochis,
Voy a un rancho aquí adelante”,
“Puede seguir su camino”,
“Que le vaya bien, compadre”,
Ese retén tiene fama
De que nadie se les pasa
Pero yo ando disfrutando
Aquí en Las Vegas, Nevada

Hasta les crucé a los gringos
Con la troca [*truck*, vehículo pesado] bien cargada.

Mi santito preferido, de Los cuates de Sinaloa

(Ortiz Castillo, 2012, p. 226)

Un joven muy bien vestido
De vaquero y con tejana [sombbrero de vaquero tipo tejano],
Con varios anillos de oro,
En su muñeca una esclava,
Y una imagen de Malverde
En su cuello trae colgada [...]
Una troca color verde,
Con clavo bien protegido [cargamento escondido]
De cristal y cocaína
Le caben treinta y seis kilos,
Por Juárez viene a cruzar,
Muy seguro de sí mismo.

La imagen de Malverde, de la Banda MS

(Ortiz Castillo, 2012, p. 228).

Me cansé de la pobreza,
De la yunta y del arado [...]
Le di un beso a Malverde,
El único que tenía.
Cuando llegué a Culiacán
Fui a su tumba y le pedía,
Cuando vi llorar sus ojos
Supe que me comprendía [...]
Ahora tengo de todo
Lo que antes no creía.
A aquel amigo tan noble
Le pagué su mercancía,
Prefiero año parado
Que doscientos de rodillas.

Corrido a Jesús Malverde IV, by Saúl, “El Jaguar” Alarcón

(Ortiz Castillo, 2012, p. 233)

Malverde's narcocorridos place his devotion in the midst of a context in which flesh and bone bandits resemble the santón narco. The miraculous intervention of the saint grants

them continuity in the world of crime, and at the same time, it releases the tension of everyday life in drug trafficking by compensating a precarious and illegal life with promises of prosperity. For Gudrún, if Malverde symbolizes the righteous and good-natured bandit of his time, who helped the needy, the drug trafficker emerges as the new outlaw-hero, who alleviates the needs of the poor and resents the lack of interest of the government or the political system in providing alternatives (Gudrún, 2014, pp. 185-186).

CONCLUSIONS

The present article has attempted to describe how the cult of Jesús Malverde underwent different transformations throughout Mexican history, modifying and amplifying the devotion in such a way that the local legend became the basis for spiritual support in a global context. From its emergence in the Porfiriato to the expansion of drug consumption during the twentieth century and the emergence of transnational criminal organizations, the figure of the saint-bandit has experienced mutations that parallel changes in the Mexican social reality. Malverde's worship is exactly in the intersection of formal and informal horizons, of the world of legality and the world of corruption, of the territory of the rich and the territory of the poor, of Mexico and the United States, of fanatical traffickers and malevolent traffickers, in short, between life and death. Malverde is a ghost that roams freely between the luminous side of goodness and the dark side of criminality. In a world devoid of charity, Malverde emerges as a generous padrino, a symbol of resistance to an oppressive world. His soul is an emotional haven for misfits and dysfunctional members of society, and his devotees are granted both the benefit of intimacy in criminal action and anonymity to break the rules.

Beyond his resemblance with Pedro Infante, Malverde is a symbolic source of cultural coherence that embodies the values of loyalty, kindness, courage, and faith that should prevail among those who choose a criminal life, serving also as a beacon of good and evil within the ethics of transgression. Mexican bards who sing of his deeds revere the bandit of bygone times, but they also praise the cursed heroes of today, those who find a model of criminal behavior in the saint. Always aware of his devotees' pain, wherever they could be, whether in Culiacán or California: borders were porous for Jesús Malverde, who also blurred the lines separating reality from the realm of magic. The phenomenon of Jesús Malverde's cult represents, so to speak, the marvelous real dimension ingrained in Latin American history, perhaps the only reason behind the persistence of drug trafficking in contexts of harsh repression by the State. The chief of chiefs among the narcos is just beyond human comprehension: he resides in the spiritual plane.

Translator: Miguel Ángel Ríos Flores

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