



King Death: The Origins and Identity of Guatemalan and Mexican Skeleton Saint, Rey Pascual

R. Andrew Chesnut¹

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Abstract

This article delves into the intriguing origins and identity of the folk saint Rey Pascual, a syncretic figure venerated in Guatemala and Mexico. Rey Pascual's emergence is rooted in the blending of Catholic and Mayan beliefs, transforming the Spanish saint Pascual Bailón into a skeletal folk saint. Pascual Bailón, a sixteenth-century Franciscan friar known for his mystic and contemplative nature, was later venerated in the Americas following his alleged apparition in Guatemala during a typhoid epidemic. This apparition, a luminescent skeleton, promised to end the epidemic in exchange for being recognized as a patron saint. Over time, Rey Pascual's cult evolved, incorporating elements from European Grim Reapers and Indigenous death deities, symbolizing a unique amalgamation of religious elements. His identity and veneration were further shaped by historical events, including persecution by the Catholic Church and state authorities in both Guatemala and Mexico. Despite these challenges, Rey Pascual's following grew, with devotees attributing various miracles and protective powers to him. This article highlights Rey Pascual's role as a symbol of resilience and spiritual agency, particularly among Indigenous and mestizo communities. It emphasizes how Rey Pascual's story reflects the adaptability of religious beliefs in the face of cultural change and the enduring legacy of syncretism in Latin American religious life.

Keywords Rey Pascual · Guatemala · Mexico · Folk Saint · Syncretism · Indigenous · Santa Muerte · Catholicism

Research Methodology

The intricate study of Guatemalan folk saint Rey Pascual through a multifaceted research methodology—merging historical analysis, ethnography, and comparative religion—unravels the complex fabric of Catholic and Mayan religious syncretism. This approach, rooted in qualitative and interpretive frameworks, dissects the cultural

✉ R. Andrew Chesnut
rachesnut@vcu.edu

¹ School of World Studies, Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, VA, USA

and religious interplays that catalyzed Rey Pascual's veneration across Guatemala and Chiapas, Mexico. By leveraging Carlos Navarrete's seminal monograph alongside a robust engagement with ethnographic fieldwork and comparative analyses, this research illuminates the evolutionary trajectory of Rey Pascual's cult. It demonstrates how the syncretic fusion of Catholic saints with Indigenous deities, set against the Spanish colonial backdrop, gave rise to a unique religious figure whose veneration perdures in contemporary practices. Furthermore, the exploration into the academic discourse on syncretism, particularly within Latin American religious practices, underscores the dynamic nature of religious identity and expression, shaped by historical legacies and ongoing glocal interactions. This article not only contributes to the broader academic discourse on religious syncretism and cultural resilience but also provides a comprehensive understanding of Rey Pascual's origins, identity, and the enduring significance of syncretic saints in Latin American religious and cultural landscapes.

In this wide-ranging study on the origins and religious significance of Guatemalan folk saint Rey Pascual, the research methodology employed is multidisciplinary, combining historical analysis, ethnography, and comparative religion to elucidate the syncretism of Catholic and Mayan religious traditions. The approach is both qualitative and interpretive, aiming to understand the complex interplay between different cultural and religious elements that gave rise to Rey Pascual's veneration in Guatemala and Chiapas, Mexico.

Secondary sources, especially Carlos Navarrete's monograph, which is the sole book length study of the skeleton saint, form the backbone of the section on history, with historical documents and records providing insights into the early manifestations of Rey Pascual's veneration and its evolution over time. The analysis of these documents, including church records, colonial period writings, and legal documents concerning the brotherhoods and cults dedicated to Rey Pascual, offers a historical context that illuminates how Catholic saints were syncretized with Indigenous deities, reflecting the colonial encounter and its aftermath.

Ethnographic fieldwork conducted during the summers of 2014 and 2022 is a crucial component of the methodology, with interviews and participant observation conducted in Olintepeque, Guatemala, and Tuxtla Gutierrez, Chiapas. These firsthand accounts from devotees, religious leaders, and community members offer invaluable insights into the contemporary practice of Rey Pascual's veneration and its significance for local identities. This qualitative data, collected through semi-structured interviews and observations of rituals and festivals, underscores the living tradition of Rey Pascual's cult and its role in community life.

Comparative analysis with other syncretic skeleton saints, such as Santa Muerte in Mexico and San La Muerte in Argentina and Paraguay, contextualizes the study by situating Rey Pascual within a broader context of Latin American folk saint veneration. This comparison highlights the unique features of Rey Pascual's cult while also revealing common patterns in the formation and development of folk saints, such as the incorporation of Indigenous cosmologies and the resistance to institutional religious control.

This article also employs theoretical frameworks from the study of syncretism, folklore, and post-colonial religious transformations to analyze the data. This theoretical grounding helps in interpreting the complex cultural dynamics at play in the

veneration of Rey Pascual and situating the findings within the larger academic discourse on syncretism and religious change in post-colonial societies.

Syncretism in Latin American Religions

The academic debate on religious syncretism in Latin America encompasses a nuanced discourse, addressing the intersections of indigenous, African, and European religious traditions. This dialogue is rooted in historical encounters and the resulting amalgamations that have significantly shaped the religious landscape of the region. Social scientists engage with this complex phenomenon from various disciplines, including anthropology, history, and religious studies, each bringing distinct perspectives to the understanding of syncretism.

One central theme in this debate is the conceptualization of syncretism itself. Stewart and Shaw (1994) argue that syncretism represents a creative and adaptive process, a perspective that views religious blending as a form of cultural resistance and survival. This view is particularly relevant in the Latin American context, where syncretism has often served as a means for Indigenous and African communities to preserve their spiritual identities under the guise of Catholic practices. The veneration of folk saints, such as Rey Pascual, blending Catholic and Mayan religious elements, exemplifies this adaptive syncretism (Chesnut 2003).

However, this interpretation is not without its critics. Some scholars caution against a romanticized view of syncretism, pointing out the complex power dynamics involved. Bastian (1997), for instance, stresses that syncretism in the colonial context often occurred under conditions of coercion, where the imposition of European Christianity necessitated a negotiation of identity and belief by Indigenous peoples. This perspective emphasizes the asymmetrical power relations inherent in the colonial encounter and the subsequent formation of syncretic practices.

The debate also extends to the notions of religious authenticity and purity. While some contend that syncretism dilutes the “original” essence of religious traditions, others argue against the very idea of purity in religious expression. Canclini (1995) correctly challenges the concept of authentic, unaltered religious practices, asserting that all religious traditions are inherently syncretic, having been shaped by historical interactions and exchanges. This perspective is supported by research demonstrating the resilience and adaptability of African diasporan religious groups in the Americas, which have managed to preserve core elements while incorporating new influences (Thornton 1998).

Moreover, contemporary discussions on syncretism engage with the impacts of globalization and modernity on religious practices. Levitt (2001) explores how global flows of people, ideas, and technologies are influencing religious syncretism today, positing that while globalization may lead to increased religious homogenization, it also provides opportunities for the reassertion of local identities through syncretic practices.

In short, the academic debate on religious syncretism in Latin America is marked by a diversity of views and approaches. It underscores the dynamic and evolving nature of religious practices, shaped by historical legacies, cultural exchanges, and

the ongoing tensions between local identities and global forces. This rich discourse continues to offer insightful reflections on the power of syncretism as a strategy for cultural resilience and adaptation in the face of change.

Origins in Guatemala

Guatemalan folk saint Rey Pascual's foundation myth is a fascinating account of Catholic and Mayan syncretism in which the original Spanish saint, Pascual Bailón, morphs into the skeletal folk saint who is venerated today in Olinstepeque and also Tuxtla Gutiérrez, the capital of Chiapas, Mexico's southernmost state. A canonized saint whose feast day is May 17, Pascual Bailón was a Franciscan friar from Aragón who lived during the second half of the sixteenth century and was known as mystic and contemplative. He was beatified by the Church in 1618, just a couple decades after his death, and then canonized in 1690. Although he never set foot in the Americas, his purported apparition in Guatemala in 1650 to a deathly ill Mayan man is credited with ending a virulent typhoid epidemic (Feldman 1999; 23–26).

Legend has it that the Spanish holy man, the patron saint of cooks, appeared in the form of a tall skeleton in luminescent robes at the deathbed of a prominent Kaqchikel man and presented himself as Saint Pascual, even though it would be forty more years until he was canonized. In the classic quid pro quo relationship that pervades grassroots religion in Latin America, the skeletal saint offered to end the epidemic in the Kaqchikel region of present-day Ciudad Vieja, Sacatepéquez, if the community adopted him as their patron saint (Feldman 1999; 23–26).

As proof of his saintly powers, Pascual predicted that in 9 days the ailing recipient of the vision would succumb to his high fever and at the same time the epidemic would run its course. As word of the beatified Aragonese's correct prediction spread, his image, much to the dismay of the Spanish Inquisition, became increasingly popular in the region during the colonial period (Feldman 1999; 23–26). Over time, Rey Pascual has expanded his repertoire from faith healing to the multitasking miracle worker that he is today. However, his first miracle as the new skeletal folk saint in Guatemala of eradicating disease remains at the core of his present-day mission as revealed in interviews with devotees.

While Rey San Pascual was birthed by a syncretism paralleling that of his fellow folk saints of death, Mexican Santa Muerte and Argentine and Paraguayan San La Muerte, the Guatemalan skeleton saint also possesses unique characteristics that distinguish him from his bony brethren. The supernatural identity of all three folk saints owes to the Indigenous deities that syncretized with the Spanish Grim Reaper and Catholic saints. In Europe the Reaper and Reapers were mere artistic and literary personifications of death and were not beseeched for miracles of health, wealth, and love. In contrast, many Indigenous groups across the Americas had death deities represented as human skeletons and skulls. For example, the skeletal spouses Mictécacihuatl and Mictlantecutli ruled together over the Aztec underworld, Mictlan, while in Maya cosmology, Kisin, the death deity of the Lacandon Maya, was often depicted on pottery as a dancing skeleton with a cigar in his mouth, reminiscent of the European *danse macabre* sans the smokes (Boremanse 1986; 39–44).

So like the Chichimecs in Mexico, the first Indigenous group recorded worshipping Santa Muerte and the Guarani of Paraguay and Argentina with San la Muerte (Chesnut 2017, 29–30), the Kaqchikel Mayas, sourced as the origin of Rey Pascual, undoubtedly associated the Spanish Grim Reaper with their own death deities. During the first century or so of Spanish conquest and colonization, death was omnipresent like never before for the Maya and Indigenous peoples across the Americas as smallpox claimed so many lives that the demographic collapse in the Americas of the sixteenth century was one of the greatest population declines in human history (Hughes 2021). Just as the Grim Reaper as the skeletal personification of death originated during the Black Plague of the fourteenth century, when about a third of Europeans went to an early grave, both the Spanish Reaper and Mayan death gods loomed larger than ever in the context virulent epidemics during the colonial era. In both Europe and Colonial Spanish America, Catholic saints and advocations of the Virgin Mary were believed to routinely intervene to end epidemics and plagues. Indeed, Saints Sebastian and Roch became the favored “plague saints” during the Black Death in Europe when millions of Catholics beseeched them for both protection and recovery from the viral pestilence (Hartman 2019).

So, who was that mysterious luminescent skeleton that appeared to the moribund Mayan offering to end the typhoid epidemic in exchange for having him declared patron saint of the region? The cloaked skeleton of course identified himself as the Spanish saint Pascual Bailon, who was somewhat known in mid-seventeenth Guatemala, as the future spiritual patron of cooks had been already beatified in 1618 and his cause for sainthood was being promoted by fellow Franciscans. And while the apparition donned an apparent European-style robe, the great majority of Catholic saints are not depicted as skeletons, the Catacomb Saints of Germania would appear to be the major exception but they are essentially folk saints since they were never canonized (Koudounaris 2013). The description of a glowing cloaked skeleton of course evokes the Grim Reaper, but the European personification of death was not a supernatural miracle worker. The contractual offer to end the typhoid epidemic in exchange for being adopted as a regional patron saint reveals an intriguing amalgamation of a Catholic saint, the Grim Reaper, and Mayan deities.

Although the skeletal apparition materialized as the European Reaper, its awesome supernatural power, the ability to end an epidemic, was more in line with the miracle-working capabilities of both Catholic saints and Mayan death gods. Thus, the apparition was European in form, but its *modus operandi* was a fusion of the god-like power of Catholic saints and Mayan deities. The skeletal apparition who appeared to the Kakchiquel elder was a textbook case syncretism — the fusion of discrete religious elements — a Catholic saint, the European Grim Reaper, and Mayan death deities which resulted in a new vernacular holy figure, Rey Pascual.

The syncretic identity of skeleton saint San Rey Pascual was readily apparent to the Church in Guatemala with the Inquisition called in to suppress the heretical representation of Saint Pascual Bailon as one of the main Medieval representations of mortality — King Death (Platt 1997). Indeed, both the nomenclature and iconography of Rey San Pascual reflect the skeleton saint’s representation as *Rex Mortem*. Standing just 20 inches tall, the effigy housed at the temple in Olintepeque is carved from wood and wears a king’s crown atop his bald skull, and when I visited his

shrine in the summer of 2014, he donned a regal robe that appeared to be cream-colored satin. Beneath the robe, he holds a small silver scythe, the iconic accoutrement of the Grim Reaper symbolizing the harvesting of souls.

History in Mexico

While little is known about the history of Rey San Pascual, he has had a complex relationship with the Catholic Church, both in Guatemala, and Tuxtla Gutierrez, the capital of Chiapas. It's not until 1872, more than two centuries after the skeleton saint appeared in Orintepeque, that Rey San Pascual was first mentioned in the Mexican historical record. The charter establishing a brotherhood dedicated to the veneration of the death saint "In the City of Tuxtla on the 5th of December of 1872 in the Barrio of San Jacinto with the presence of neighbors from San Roque and Santo Calvario at the invitation of Mr. Crisostomo Sol and Jode Moreno Sospo, attendees gathered to formalize a major brotherhood and explore possible resources for building a shrine dedicated to the cult and veneration of San Pascual Rey, and having verified the meeting at the house of Mr. Anastacio Cosospo at 4:00 in the afternoon on this date, in which attendees learned of the benefits of promoting veneration of the sacred image to whom our people owe favors and services for his miracles..." (Navarrete 1982; 35).

According to the rector of the Cathedral of San Marcos Tuxtla, until 1902 a wooden skeleton resting in a coffin-cart and known as "San Pascualito" was kept in one of the side chapels of the Cathedral and at some undetermined point was moved to the church of El Calvario, next to the municipal market. Eyewitness Sanchez Chanaona without being able to recall dates said that the image of "the skeleton...was for a long time housed under the roof of the church in el Calvario temple where it was and still is the object of veneration and worship" (Navarrete 1982; 36).

Revolutionary Repression

The Constitutionalist wing of the Mexican Revolution (1910–1920) was radically anti-clerical so when their troops arrived in Chiapas in 1914 General Jesus Agustin Castro ordered the skeletal effigy of San Pascual Rey destroyed due to idolatry. At the time and until recently members of the Zoque Indigenous group constituted the core of the skeleton saint's devotional base so it was the Zoque devotional leader Antonio Morales who spirited the effigy out of the chapel for a hideout in the hills. Two years after the departure of the revolutionaries San Pascual Rey was returned to the chapel. Viewed as the savior of the saint, Antonio Morales after his death became a popular spirit among spiritist mediums who worked with the skeleton saint.

Scarcely back in his coffin, the miracle-working skeleton had to go into hiding yet again in 1934 when the governor of Chiapas instituted radical anti-clerical measures including the shuttering of Catholic churches and the public immolation of hundreds of Catholic images and symbols. Escaping the iconoclastic bonfires, San Pascualito

took refuge in the homes of his devotees. With diminished church-state conflict in the 1940s the skeleton saint was able to return once again to the chapel where he had been venerated and at the end of the decade a feast day was organized by the old brotherhood for the 17th of May corresponding to that of Spanish saint Pascual Bailon.

It appears that at this time the brotherhood changed the death saint's traditional name from San Pascual Rey to San Pascualito (Navarrete 1982; 38). The removal of "Rey" from his name in Chiapas marked the beginning of a transition from a King Death figure to one more in line with the Aragonese patron saint of cooks. By the 1950s San Pascualito had become the most popular saint in central Chiapas with news of his latest miracles broadcast on radio programs and paper flyers sponsored by beer outlets which profited from the sales of their brew at pilgrimages and on his annual feast day. The folk saint's growing popularity at mid-century led to the need for larger sacred space for his veneration so the brotherhood raised funds to purchase a neighboring house and lot (Navarrete 1982; 38).

Catholic Repression

San Pascualito's growing popularity provoked a new round of persecution and harassment of his devotees but this time not at the hands of the state. Despite the fact that the syncretic saint had long been associated with and even housed in the Catholic Church, some priests began to inveigh against the "idolatry" of his cult. In a 1954 harangue against San Pascualito, Father Agustin Alvarez mockingly asked if it was really Saint Pascual Bailon's skeleton in the Tuxtla Gutierrez temple when everyone knew that he's really buried in Spain (Navarrete 1982; 39). When leaders of the brotherhood sought the blessing of the Catholic bishop of Tuxtla Gutierrez, he declined saying that first they'd have to remove the skeleton in the coffin. Contrariwise they would become the "sect of the Pascualitos" (39). Along the same lines, an editorial in a local Catholic journal denounced the "superstition." "In the barrio of San Pascual there's a no-holds-barred festival in the days preceding the feast of their holy patron...The deceitful coffin is all dressed up and is almost buried in a mound of flowers. The slaves to superstition worship him on their knees" (Navarrete 1982; 40). The crescendo of Catholic criticism of the skeleton saint and his followers culminated in the federal Secretary of the Treasury ordering the temple shuttered on trumped up charges of mismanagement of funds. In response, the brotherhood sought legal counsel which eventually led to the re-opening of the temple but under new management.

Persecution of the skeleton saint by the Roman Catholic Church was the result of the Romanization of the Church across Latin America, initiated in the 1930s. It represented a significant historical and cultural shift aimed at consolidating Vatican control and standardizing Catholic practices across the region. This movement was characterized by a concerted effort from the Vatican to reinforce the authority of the Roman Catholic orthodoxy, promote liturgical uniformity, and curtail local syncretic practices that blended Indigenous, African, and European elements. The Romanization campaign was part of a broader strategy under Pope Pius XI, who sought to strengthen the

global influence of the Catholic Church and counteract the growing appeal of Protestantism and secular ideologies (Gooren 2010). This period saw the imposition of the Latin Mass, the promotion of Roman Catholic doctrine, and the appointment of European clergy to key positions in Latin American dioceses, aiming to realign the regional churches with the central doctrines and practices of the Vatican (Levine 1992). This push for Romanization met with varying degrees of resistance and accommodation, as local clergy and laity navigated the tensions between adherence to Rome and the preservation of local religious expressions, reflecting the complex interplay of global religious authority and local cultural identity (Dussel 1992).

Orthodox Incorporation

Under pressure from the Catholic Church, the Mexican federal government ruled that while the temple of San Pascualito had the right to operate under Mexican laws on freedom of worship, the funds needed to be managed by a legally recognized religious association. Thus, the temple was incorporated into the Mexican Catholic Apostolic Orthodox Church and Father Agustin de la Cruz was sent from Mexico City and celebrated the first mass in 1960 and became the first bishop the following decade (Navarrete 1982; 43). The Mexican Catholic Orthodox Church had been founded in 1925 by former Catholic priest and Freemason, José Joaquín Pérez Budar, as a schismatic breakaway from the Roman Catholic Church that supported the anti-clerical campaign of President Plutarco Elias Calles. Agustin de la Cruz asserted control of the motley crew of Spiritists, Zoques, and curanderos who constituted the skeleton saint's devotional base and to make sure his religious authority was not questioned he dissolved the brotherhood which had been so instrumental in maintaining and even spreading devotion to the San Pascualito.

While the coffin containing the wooden effigy of the skeleton saint remained at the front of the church, the overarching tendency on the part of Bishop de la Cruz was to elevate the figure of Spanish saint Pascual Bailon while downplaying devotion to the skeleton saint. The pamphlet containing Saint Pascual Bailon's hagiography and a prayer to him, which I obtained during a visit to the Cathedral in 2014, depicts the Spanish patron of chefs exclusively in flesh and bones with the only nod to the skeleton saint being a simple sketch of the cart but without the coffin containing his effigy on top. Likewise, the skeletal effigy of San Pascualito is completely absent from the Cathedral's Facebook page, created in July, 2016 and accessed in April of 2022. In a couple of photos of the sanctuary, the coffin-cart is barely visible at the top of the altar covered with a white shroud. In contrast, both the official portrait of the Spanish saint and images of the Virgin of Guadalupe abound on the site. Since 1960, there have been three bishops.

Identity—Mayan God or Catholic Saint?

Since Rey Pascual was born of the syncretism of a Spanish Catholic saint and Mayan death deities, it's only natural that some devotees view him more as an Indigenous god while others perceive him as completely Christian. The great

majority of my informants in both Olintepeque and Tuxtla Gutierrez told me that he is a Catholic saint, like Saint Jude and the Just Judge, an advocacy of Jesus popular at the temple in Chiapas. In fact, every single devotee at the temple in Tuxtla Gutierrez asserted the Catholic identity of Rey Pascual. The saint's Catholicness in Chiapas owes to two major factors. Due to the history of religious persecution and intolerance at both the hands of state and federal government along with the Catholic Church in Chiapas, the Orthodox Cathedral has been compelled to emphasize the Spanish saint Pascual Bailon while hiding the skeleton in the closet or more specifically in the coffin. Without exception, all the images of San Pascualito in the church are of the Aragonese patron of cooks. None of the dozens of devotees whom I interviewed had ever even seen the skeletal effigy of San Pascual whose closed casket is only displayed once a year during his feast day. So, it's only natural that devotees, the majority of whom are not Orthodox and don't attend mass at the church, view the saint as Catholic. Reinforcing Pascual's Catholic identity is the fact that the great majority of devotees in Tuxtla Gutierrez are mestizo and as such live apart from the local Zoques who used to form the devotional base of the saint's cult and had more interaction with the saint in skeletal form.

While in Mexico all my informants viewed San Pascualito as Catholic, a small minority at the temple in Olintepeque posited him as a Mayan god, never by name, who had to partially disguise himself as the Spanish saint to avoid persecution by church and state. The four devotees who subscribed to a Mayan view of Rey Pascual were all self-described Mayan priests and shamans who perform spiritual cleansings invoking not only the male skeleton saint but also his female counterpart, Santa Muerte, and Guatemalan folk saint Maximon. These Quiche religious specialists should be seen as organic intellectuals, who in contrast to other devotees whom I interviewed, had actually reflected on the saint's origins and identity. Three of the four Mayan priests referred to Rey Pascual as "our grandfather," and one I met at the annual feast day in Olintepeque was very critical of the Catholic prayers recited in the temple, calling the female prayer leaders "brainwashed."

Contemporary Mayan spirituality represents a vibrant and enduring aspect of Indigenous cultural identity in Mesoamerica, reflecting a complex synthesis of pre-Columbian religious practices and post-colonial influences. Despite centuries of colonial repression and ongoing challenges of modernization, Mayan communities continue to maintain and adapt their ancestral spiritual traditions, integrating them with elements of Christianity and other religious influences. This resilience and adaptability are evident in rituals, ceremonies, and cosmological beliefs that honor the sacredness of nature, ancestral veneration, and the cyclical concept of time. Scholars such as Allen Christenson (2001) and Victor Montejo (2005) have underscored the significance of these practices not only as religious expressions but also as forms of cultural resistance and identity reaffirmation. Contemporary Mayan spirituality is deeply intertwined with social and political struggles, as Indigenous communities assert their rights and sovereignty. Ritual specialists, known as *Ajq'ijab'* (daykeepers), play a crucial role in sustaining this spiritual legacy, performing ceremonies that engage with cosmic energies

and seek to maintain balance and harmony within the community and the natural world (Tedlock 1992). This ongoing vitality of Mayan spirituality challenges reductive narratives of disappearance or assimilation, showcasing a dynamic and living tradition that continues to evolve and influence broader cultural and spiritual landscapes in Latin America.

Like the small minority of Mexican Santa Muertistas who seek to strip the White Girl (one of her common monikers) of Catholic influence, Andres and many fellow priests and priestesses see no reason to continue worshiping their Mayan god in Christian trappings. At the Guatemalan temple, it's much easier to imagine Rey Pascual as a Mayan death deity because he is uniformly depicted as a male skeleton. While the main statue at the altar is an unmistakable likeness of the European King Death, there are other effigies around the temple complex in which he is dressed in Mayan fashion with a colorful poncho. Rey Pascual as a skeleton saint at the Guatemalan temple, of course, greatly contrasts with the flesh and blood depiction of Spanish saint Pascual Bailon at the Mexican house of worship. However, in Olintepeque, it was only the Mayan priests and priestess who viewed Rey Pascual as an Indigenous deity. As in Mexico, the rank and file devotees whom I interviewed, a mix of Quiches and Ladinos, were quick to claim Rey Pascual as a Catholic saint.

Very Miraculous

For the great majority of devotees of Rey San Pascual, as is the case for saints in general, the origin and identities of their object of veneration are of mere academic concern. Without the luxury to ponder such abstract matters, rank and file believers are primarily interested in receiving miracles and blessings from their saint. In fact, I often heard San Pascual described as “muy milagroso,” very miraculous. And for syncretic saint Pascual Bailon, as is the case for most Latin American folk saints, the most important spiritual service he provides is health and faith healing. Undoubtedly, miracles of healing were thrown into high relief given that most of my interviews were conducted at the tail end of the Covid pandemic, even doing most of them while masked for protection.

While several of my informants, both in Tuxtla Gutierrez and Olintepeque, related miracles of being healed from Coronavirus, Rossy at the Mexican temple stands out for claiming that San Pascualito had healed both of her septuagenarian parents from Covid. Other devotees had invoked the skeleton saint for common physical ailments, such as migraines, gastrointestinal problems, and dysentery but an almost equal number cited Rey Pascual healing them or family members of supernatural maladies, such as bad vibes and evil spirits. Envy and evil eye are viewed as common culprits for supernatural suffering and a curandero I met at the Mexican temple, Joaquin, who performs cleansing for a fee in the sanctuary, stated that bad vibes are the most common affliction he has treated in his two years of service as a “rameador.” Named for the act of lightly striking clients with bunches of basil (rameada) the rameadores perform spiritual cleansings in the name of San Pascualito and other saints, such as Jude and the Just Judge.

Across Latin America, basil is more important as a quasi-panacea than as a culinary herb and is employed to heal both supernatural and physical ailments such as anxiety and tension, congestion, coughs, colds, colic, constipation, cuts and abrasions, diarrhea, digestive disorders, dysentery, fevers, flatulence, headaches and migraines, indigestion, insect bites and stings, menstrual cramps, muscle tension, nerve pain, nervousness, sinusitis, sore throats, and lethargy. I will never forget the look on the face of my Brazilian friend when I revealed that the green sauce, pesto, that I had served on top of her pasta was made with basil, a strictly medicinal herb for her and most of her compatriots. Given that basil only arrived in Latin America with the Iberian conquest and colonization, it's quite remarkable how ubiquitous it has become across the region as a healing herb utilized in folk Catholicism, religions of the African diaspora, such as Candomble, and witchcraft. Returning to basil curandero Joaquin, he first conducts a brief interview with clients to discern the nature of their problem and then in ritual lasting between two and three minutes, he lightly strikes the afflicted from head to toe with bunches of basil while invoking the healing powers of San Pascualito and other saints.

Conjuring

Another important ritual at the Chiapas Cathedral is the conjure, which according to Bishop Rogelio Carrillo, "is a prayer of protection, healing and liberation." It is a ritual recited in Latin and performed exclusively by Orthodox priests. In reality, the ritual is the "unction of the sick." This sacrament comprises three parts. The first is made up of responses and admonitions that invite clients to prepare themselves for healing. The second part consists of an exorcism as a requirement of absolution, another sacrament that refers to the forgiveness of sins. The priest recites the ritual formula of exorcism, anointing the head and hands of the believer. Recitation of the Lord's Prayer concludes the ritual.

The conjure is a Pre-Vatican II Catholic ritual. The priests conduct it according to the Manual of Parish Priests published in 1930 under the tutelage of the Archbishopric of Mexico. At the entrance to the temple there is an explanatory note on the meaning and biblical justification given by the Orthodox Church to frame the conjure in Christian practice: "Whoever is sick, call the presbyters of the Church to pray for him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord (James, 5:14)." However, the conjuring also has pagan roots. It's a practice that dates back to the 1970s and is the phenomenological bridge between the Orthodox Church and local curanderos. The devotees who request the conjure generally do so upon recommendation from the basil curanderos. Father Carlos explained, "They come and say, I came recommended from such and such brother (healer), he asked me for seven conjures, or ten, or whatever. We are not interested in who sends them to us. The important thing is that they do their job by sending them here" ("Etnografía Histórica de las Configuraciones Religiosas de un Santo Esqueleto en Chiapas y Guatemala," PhD dissertation by Alejandro Rodríguez López). The Orthodox priests earn a significant amount of their income from performing conjures.

In contrast to the common practice of Catholic priests and Protestant ministers, the Orthodox clerics of San Pascualito do not form cadres of believers committed to their institution. Pastoral activity is limited to the ritual and devotional sphere. Confirming that San Pascualito is not only petitioned for miracles and blessings of a Christian nature, Father Carlos explained, “there are people who ask for death or evil to others, or they simply ask for evil. For example, they ask for others to get sick. San Pascualito does not cause illness, he helps make it go away.”

Protection and Harm

While the great majority of my informants claimed that they didn’t invoke Rey Pascual for harm against others, many stated they were aware of others asking King Death to inflict injury on others. Twenty-three-year-old Hitler from Olinstepeque was one of the few devotees I met who admitted to asking the saint to harm others. While in line to view Rey Pascual at the annual feast in 2022, Hitler told me that a few months ago he had been assaulted by a local gang who left him for dead in an Olinstepeque creek. Armed with two bottles of Quetzalteca, Hitler intended to offer the cheap rum to the skeleton saint in return for divine justice for his assailants. When I asked the determined devotee what he meant by justice he said, “you know, take them out.” In countries with the thirteenth and nineteenth highest murder rates on the planet, Mexico and Guatemala respectively, prayers for protection against the type of assault suffered by Hitler are constant.

Truck and taxi drivers are especially vulnerable to violence in the form of carjackings and robbery of their cash and/or load, which is why 58-year-old cab driver Raul, from Retalhuleu, mentioned “protecting my life” as the most important spiritual service provided by King Death. While most of the devotees of Rey San Pascual with whom I spoke in Guatemala were also followers of other saints, especially Maximon and Santa Muerte, Raul is my only informant who mentioned praying to Don Diego Duende, a liminal elf with a modest presence on the Mexican and Central American spiritual landscape.

Syncretic Saint

In short, the historical development of Rey Pascual, a syncretic folk saint born from the syncretism of Catholic and Mayan religious traditions, embodies a remarkable story of faith, identity, and cultural fusion. The transformation of Pascual Bailón, a Spanish Franciscan friar, into Rey Pascual, a skeletal folk saint in Guatemala and Chiapas, Mexico, is a testament to the dynamic interaction of European and Indigenous religious beliefs during and after the colonial period. The metamorphosis of Pascual Bailón into the skeletal folk saint Rey Pascual highlights the adaptability and resilience of religious beliefs and practices in the face of cultural collision and change. This transformation is not merely a superficial change in iconography but signifies a deeper syncretism where Spanish Catholicism intermingles with Indigenous spiritualities, especially around concepts of death and the afterlife.

Rey Pascual's story further demonstrates the complex relationship between popular religious practices and institutional religion. The Catholic Church's efforts to suppress the veneration of Rey Pascual, as illustrated by the actions of the Inquisition and later the anti-clerical measures in Mexico, reflect the ongoing tensions between orthodoxy and popular religiosity. These conflicts, however, did not diminish the devotion to Rey Pascual but rather reinforced his significance as a symbol of resilience and spiritual agency among his followers. Moreover, Rey Pascual serves as a powerful emblem of identity, particularly for Indigenous and mestizo communities. His veneration is not just a religious act but also a form of cultural and communal affirmation. This is evident in the way devotees in Olintepeque and Tuxtla Gutierrez perceive him, oscillating between his Catholic and Indigenous identities, depending on their cultural and religious backgrounds.

In essence, the story of Rey Pascual is a narrative of cultural survival and adaptation. It's a story that speaks to the power of faith and the human capacity to find meaning and solace in the divine, even amid cultural upheaval and change. As a folk saint, Rey Pascual transcends his origins, becoming a beacon of hope and a source of miracles for his devotees. His ongoing veneration is a vivid reminder of the enduring legacy of syncretism in Latin American religious life, where diverse traditions continue to combine, coexist, and enrich each other.

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Declarations

Conflict of Interest The author declares no competing interests.

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