

This is Mexico's real Day of the Dead

In Mexico City's most notorious district, the home of the Holy Death cult, Day of the Dead celebrations have a distinctly darker edge. And now the "phenomenon" is spreading.

By photojournalist Michael Maher in Tepito

They come in procession, some on their knees, bearing gifts for Sante Muerte, the folk saint Holy Death.

They are the marginalised — criminals, drug addicts, sex workers, transvestites, the poor, the deranged and the sick.

This past week, millions in Mexico's capital Mexico City have been celebrating the Day of the Dead.

A Hollywood-inspired parade of ghoulish marionettes and elaborate floats even made its way down the city's main avenue.

For most it is a time to gather with family, to remember and make offerings to those who have passed.

But in Tepito, the capital's most notorious district, this most Mexican of holidays has a distinctly darker edge.

Tourists rarely venture here. In fact, they are specifically warned not to.

Known as the *barrio bravo* or "fierce neighbourhood", Tepito is a vast, illicit marketplace where it is said anything can be procured for the right price.

It is a one-stop shopping centre for counterfeit goods, drugs, guns and assassins.

The mere mention of Tepito among the citizens of Mexico City conjures a torrent of tales about nefarious deeds.

Its notoriety has attracted the attentions of intrigued writers and artists throughout the capital.

Francisco Goldman, the celebrated novelist and Mexico City-based contributor to *New Yorker* magazine, describes Tepito as "a place of dark glamour, full of legend".

He points to its reputation for “congenital criminality” and as an insular neighbourhood where people grow up according to their own codes.

“The place is full of its own dark genius. It’s the most entrepreneurial part of the city in its own way,” Goldman says.

“It’s dangerous and the human density of it is incredible.”

Tepito is also home to the Sante Muerte or Holy Death cult.

With roots in Mexico’s criminal and prison cultures, Santa Muerte is represented as a skeleton figure clad in a wedding dress, staring out at her followers with a come-hither leer.

Pilgrims in their thousands gather at Tepito’s Santa Muerte shrine to celebrate its November 1 anniversary.

They say the “skinny lady” looks after them, curing disease, bestowing good fortune and even finding an adept lawyer when police are in pursuit.

The Catholic Church has declared Santa Muerte to be blasphemous.

But such edicts have not stopped the cult’s popularity from growing in this largely Catholic nation.

After all, Holy Death appeals to outlaws, the shunned and the dispossessed.

In Mexico, she has many to choose from, especially among the people of Tepito.

Despite the Vatican’s censure, Sante Muerte’s devotees are happy to flaunt their fealty to this Mexican folk saint, proudly displaying tattoos, body piercings and garlanded effigies.

Their procession to Tepito’s Santa Muerte shrine is a boisterous reverie fuelled by mezcal, marijuana, cocaine and amphetamines.

Overseen by the shrine’s founder, Enriqueta Romero, the day-long gathering culminates in a full-throated recital of a rosary, while devotees hold their often elaborate skeletal effigies aloft.

Enriqueta Romero, also known as Dona Queta, brushes aside the Catholic Church’s objections to Sante Muerte.

She says the Church has lost touch with its followers and excludes people like transgender worshipers from its fold.

“Holy Death listens to us and loves us,” Ms Romero declares.

“She fills a spiritual void and doesn’t discriminate against anyone.”

This might account for Sante Muerte’s growing numbers in Mexico, now estimated as high as 12 million people.

The cult’s influence is also spreading elsewhere in Latin America as well as into parts of the United States with large Latino communities.

According to Goldman, who has lived in and written about Mexico City for more than 20 years, the Sante Muerte cult is a complex phenomenon.

“You can trivialise it and say, ‘Oh, isn’t this Mexican folklore colourful?’ but when you get to know what’s going on there better, there are a lot of mysterious things about it. It’s a really intense phenomenon,” he says.

Goldman is riveted by Tepito and Sante Muerte and was struck by a remark made by a Mexican colleague who said that, “Tepito is the synthesis of Mexico and that Mexico is becoming the Tepito of the world”.

“I just found myself meditating on that phrase and the different things it suggested,” Goldman says.

“When you think of all that Tepito can be made to represent in terms of counterfeiting, violence, violent capitalism, the struggle to survive, and the generating of alternative spaces for folk spirituality in a world where traditional belief systems sometimes don’t speak to anyone anymore.

“It’s this idea of Tepito being very local and dangerous and at the same time very global.”

Adding further to Tepito’s global reach, thousands of Chinese and Korean merchants have moved into the neighbourhood and are now part of its multifarious mix.

The legends of the barrio bravo and its “skinny lady” are resonating far beyond the borders of Mexico City.