

CELEBRATING WOMEN

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In 15 countries on five continents, a photojournalist documents festivals that honor the many facets of women.

PHOTOGRAPHY AND TEXT BY PAOLA GIANTURCO

There are hundreds of festivals around the world honoring women — their spirit, their accomplishments, their rites of passage. Some events commemorate historical achievements, others grow out of religious beliefs and mythology. For five years, I photographed celebrations in 15 countries on five continents. When events clashed with the values of my own culture, I set aside judgments and simply recorded what the participants and spectators experienced. In doing that, I saw the full range

of how women are appreciated in different cultures, and how richly dimensioned life could be if we explode the limits of what our societies consider “appropriate.” And I found that it was impossible to resist participating. I quickly learned that if I put my note pad in my pocket, held my camera in my right hand, and put my microphone under my left arm, my left hand was available to sample the delicious food! I often danced and sang along. Sometimes I became so transported that I forgot my journalist’s tools and just watched the spectacle in wonder.





◀ **China: Women as Protectors**

In 960 C.E., a baby girl was born who grew up to have the power to forecast the weather, saving fishermen from storms, tides, and all kinds of watery catastrophes. She came to be known as Mazu, Protectress of the Fishermen. Over time, she was given many other titles, including Empress of Heaven, and today, she has more than 100 million followers at 3,500 Mazu temples around the world. The main temple on Mei Zhou Island in the East China Sea stands at the very spot where, according to legend, Mazu rode the winds to heaven and joined the immortals. During her birthday festival, pilgrims bring Mazu images from their local temples for three days of parades, fireworks, and offerings to honor this divine protectress.

Guadeloupe: Women as Nourishers ▲

In 1916, Creole women working as cooks on Guadeloupe's sugar plantations founded a society to help one another afford medical care and funerals. A year later, after having shared so many difficulties, they yearned to see each other on a more joyful occasion. So they created one: the *Fête des Cuisinières*. Every year since 1917, the *Cuisinières* dress in colorful costumes to attend a private mass celebrating their patron, Saint Laurent. Then they parade through the streets of Pointe-à-Pitre, carrying their best dishes to a great public feast at banquet tables set for 600. Between courses, there is dancing. And in the corner, the image of Saint Laurent watches silently. Surely he would do a little jig if he could.



Brazil: Women as Political ▲

When African slaves arrived in Brazil (in numbers four times greater than in the American colonies), they were baptized as Christians. The women, many of whom were leaders in African religious cults, secretly continued their Candomblé services. Not only did they sustain African culture, they formed a powerful abolitionist network. Freed slave women earned money to buy others' freedom by selling food and *balangandãs*, the silver charms they'd received from plantation owners. Today, at the festival of Boa Morte, their descendants celebrate with Catholic masses, processions, and feasting. When asked what they enjoy most about the festival, the women all laugh and say, "The samba!"

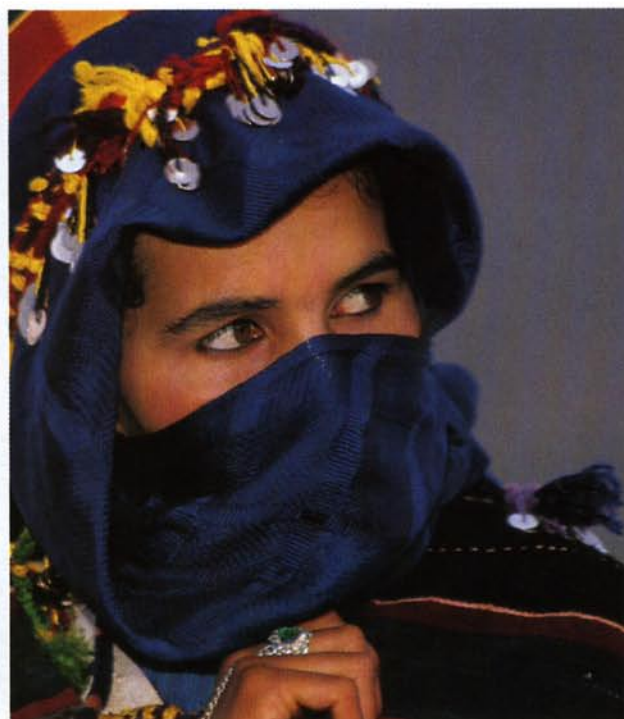


◀ Sweden: Women as Kind

There are many theories about the origin of the Swedish festival of Sankta Lucia. One goes like this: In the fourth century, a Sicilian woman took food to Christians hiding in underground tunnels. She wore candles on her head because her hands were full. Whatever its origin, there are now Sankta Lucias in almost every house in Sweden every December 13th. Girls wearing crowns and boys carrying wands wake their parents with coffee and saffron buns called *Lussekatter* (Lucia Cats). Communities and schools crown their own Sankta Lucias to spread light during the darkest time of the year. One young woman who wore the crown put it quite simply: "It is about being kind."

Morocco: Women as Initiators ►

Although they were converted to Islam, the Berbers of Morocco retain many of their tribal traditions and beliefs. In the fall, returning from pastures and fields in the High Atlas Mountains, they gather at a three-day market in Agoudal to stock up on provisions for the winter. This ephemeral tent city of 30,000 people turns out to be a perfect place for romance. Young widows and divorcees stroll in twos and threes among the market tents, wearing striped tribal mantles and beautiful scarves, seeming to shop for merchandise — but actually shopping for the ideal man. If a woman finds someone she likes, she may invite him to sit and talk in the fields nearby and ask him to become her husband. The men prepare for the mass wedding ceremony, the musicians heat up their drums, and music and dancing follow.



◀ Spain: Women as Healers

Marta, sister of Mary Magdalene and Lazarus, is said to have migrated from Palestine to southern France in 48 C.E. When a young boy who had drowned in the Rhône River was carried to her, she brought him back to life. Marta's reputation as a miracle healer spread to Spain, where she is celebrated each year in San Jose de Ribarteme on the anniversary of her death. Villagers who have had near-death experiences are carried in open coffins to the Church of Santa Marta for a mass and much thanksgiving. Afterward, there is a festive celebration with music, dancing, carnival games, fireworks, and a great feast that always includes plenty of the local specialty, octopus.

Bolivia: Women as Providers ►

The Festival of the Virgin of Urkupiña merges Indian and Catholic beliefs about the divine feminine. Every August, half a million people come to Quillacollo, Bolivia, to dance in the streets, leaping, twirling, and stomping over the six-mile route to the Church of San Ildefonso. That night, more pilgrims arrive, having bought miniature objects from roadside vendors. The miniatures symbolize just about anything a person could wish for: coats, eyeglasses, passports, diplomas, airplane tickets, wedding rings, wheelbarrows, pots of gold, packets of \$100,000 bills, even twin babies. The objects are carried to the top of the mountain where shaman women petition Mother Earth and the Virgin to grant these material wishes. And so it is that Pacha Mama (Mother Earth) and the Virgin Mary, like the women of Bolivia, are celebrated as the great providers.



United States: Women as the Ideal ▼

The “ideal girl” that Bert Parks used to sing about is easily dismissed as an anachronism. But the centerpiece of today’s Miss America pageant is not swimsuits or evening gowns or talent competitions, but a private interview with the judges about one’s “platform” for community service and social change. Empowerment programs, mentoring, crime prevention, and increasing political participation are among the programs that contestants work to promote. The pageant provides more scholarship money (\$45 million each year) than women receive from any other institution in the world. As one competitor said, “Like everyone else, I am here for the scholarships. Why else would anyone wear these ridiculous shoes?”



Inspired by the author’s work, the exhibition *Celebrating Women* is the first to be curated by The International Museum of Women. The exhibit runs through December 17 at One Market Street in San Francisco, featuring live performances and educational programs as well as photographs, costumes and artifacts from many festivals around the world. For more information, see imow.org.

Before focusing on photojournalism, Paola Gianturco worked for more than 30 years in advertising, public relations, and marketing. This article is adapted from her book *Celebrating Women* (powerHouse Books, 2004), the royalties from which will be contributed to the International Museum of Women. She is also coauthor and photographer of *In Her Hands: Craftswomen Changing the World*.