

CELEBRATING WOMEN – Festival Highlights

SWAZILAND's Reed Dance celebrates women as...VIRGINS

Swazis believe human beings were created from reeds. Annually, young women collect reeds to build a windbreak around the Queen Mother's royal compound. They call her The She Elephant, a name that symbolizes her wisdom, strength and majesty. Twenty-five thousand virgins dance to honor her. This festival salutes the country's beautiful young virgins who participate to be with their girlfriends and to display pride for their bodies and their virginity.

AUSTRIA's Rudolfina Redoute, celebrates women as...FLIRTS

The first masked balls took place at the Hofburg Imperial Palace in 1748 until Maria Theresa banned mask-wearing on the streets. Today, the Rudolfina Redoute is the only traditional masked ball during the Viennese season. Single women wear small, romantic eye masks and invite any man to dance who catches their fancy. No one knows the women's identities until they unmask at midnight.

PERU's Festival of the Virgin of Candelaria and BOLIVIA's Festival of The Virgin of Urkupiña—both celebrate women as...PROVIDERS

Incas believed that Mother Earth was The Source of everything needed for life: food, water, clothing and housing. During the sixteenth century, Quechua people converted and merged the concept of Mother Earth and The Virgin. In **Puno, Peru**, people dance for two weeks to thank—and petition—Mother Earth and The Virgin of Candelaria. In **Quillacollo, Bolivia**, five hundred thousand pilgrims dance to ask Mother Earth and the Virgin of Urkupiña for material goods—cars, money, visas, TV sets, stores, trucks and cell phones.

POLAND's Wianki Festival celebrates women as...MAGICAL

Ninth century Polish virgins went naked into the forest at midnight to pick magic herbs that made men fall in love with them. They braided the herbs with wildflowers and floated their Wianki—garlands—on lakes and rivers. If a man removed the wreath from the water, the two would share a night of revelry and perhaps a lifetime of happiness. The Catholic Church frowned on these pagan goings-on. Today, only a few small towns hold Wianki festivals. One is Ciechanowiec, northeast of Warsaw, where young girls participate—fully dressed. Frankly, these girls are more excited about the fireworks than about boys.

INDIA's Durga and Kali Pujas both celebrate women as...WARRIORS

In the twelfth century, the first Durga festival honored the multi-armed goddess who carried all the Gods' weapons and killed the evil, shape-shifting Buffalo Demon. **Durga's** festival celebrates the triumph of good over evil. In Calcutta in 2001, one animated light mural portrayed "evil" by recreating the World Trade Center on September 11. Sacred texts written in the eighth century refer to **Kali**, an even more ferocious manifestation of Durga. Once Kali became so ecstatic during a killing spree that she danced on Shiva's body. Seeing that she was dancing on her own husband, she stuck out her tongue and is

always represented with that expression. Kali is worshiped with hibiscus offerings—she likes red, which represents blood and life.

GUADELOUPE's Festival of Cuisinières celebrates women as...NOURISHERS

In 1916, Creole women working as sugar plantation cooks founded a mutual society to help each other afford medical care and funerals. Once a year the cooks celebrate their patron saint, St. Laurent, who was—they say—grillé at the stake. After parading their best dishes through the streets of Point-à-Pitre, they serve a five-hour feast.

FINLAND's World Wife-Carrying Championships celebrate women as...FUN-LOVING

In 1992 when the first Wife-Carrying Championship took place in Sonkajärvi, Finland, organizers worried what feminists might say about the men carrying women on their backs, running through water obstacles, over hurdles and through sand traps. But the region's governor, a woman, pooh-poohed the idea that the event was Neanderthal: "If anything," she said, "It's uplifting." Women's ability to enjoy this laughing-out-loud good time seems to be correlated with the confidence that comes from a century of women's suffrage and equality.

SWEDEN's Festival of Sankta Lucia celebrates women as...KIND

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. Ever since the Middle Ages, Scandinavia has celebrated Sankta Lucia, who brings light on the darkest night of the year, the pre-Gregorian winter solstice.

THAILAND's Thao Suranari Festival celebrates women as...BRAVE

In 1826, when the women of Nakhon Ratchasima were left to defend their city from the Laotian invaders, one woman, Ya Mo, led the defeat of the soldiers. The women asked for swords to kill animals to make a welcoming feast. Seducing the soldiers, they gave them so much to eat and drink that they were incapable of self-defense. Then the women cut off the men's heads, deposited the heads in a pond, and went home. The King rewarded Ya Mo with silver and gave her the title of Thao Suranari, which means Brave Woman. This festival features competitions: body building, singing, and dancing, as well as contests for the healthiest baby and most perfect fruit and vegetables.

CHINA's Mazu Festival celebrates women as...PROTECTORS

In the year 960AD, a baby girl was born who grew up with special powers—she could forecast the weather, which is crucial to fishermen who live in the typhoon territory in the East China Sea. She saved fishermen from storms, reefs and floods, earning the name Mazu, which means Protectress of the Fishermen. She was promoted, 400 years later, to Empress of Heaven.

BRAZIL's Festival of Boa Morte celebrates women as...POLITICAL

Brazil had four times more African slaves than the United States. Upon arrival in Bahia, Brazilian slaves were baptized as Christians. The Catholic Church did not realize that many of the women were leaders in African religious cults. In secret, the women

continued their Candomblé religious 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 been given by plantation owners for good work and for sexual favors. Today, 100 years after abolition, their descendants celebrate with Catholic masses and processions. But when asked what they enjoy most about the festival, the women all laugh and say, "The samba!"

SPAIN's Santa Marta Festival celebrates women as...HEALERS

In 48AD, Marta, sister of Mary Magdalene and Lazarus is said to have migrated from Palestine to Southern France. When a young boy who had drowned in the Rhone River was carried to her, she brought him back to life. Marta's gift as a healer is celebrated every year in Northwestern Spain. People who have had near-death experiences are carried in open coffins to her church, where pilgrims thank St. Marta for their health, and ask for her help if they are sick. Though this sounds somber, there's a carnival, delicious regional food and wine, and, because Galicia is profoundly Celtic, bagpipers provide the music.

MOROCCO's Marriage Festival celebrates women as...INITIATORS

Every fall, the Berber tribes, who are Muslims and shepherds, return from the High Atlas mountains. Before they "settle in" for the winter, 30,000 of them attend a market and marriage festival in Imichil, Morocco. After they've sold their animals, the widows and divorcees flirt with the most attractive men and invite them to become their husbands. The men prepare for the mass wedding, the musicians heat up their drums, and music and dancing follow.

INDIA's Nong Krem Festival celebrates women as...POWERFUL

In the matrilineal culture of the Khasi tribe in North Eastern India, children take their mothers' names; daughters inherit their mothers' wealth, and women run the markets. The tribe is ruled by a female dynasty. The High Priestess appoints her brother or son as king of the tribe and he's addressed as "Mother/Father." During the Nong Krem Festival, the women dance barefooted, their bodies totally still, inching forward with their toes. Some say they are absorbing power from the earth. Others say they are demonstrating the dignity that identifies the Khasi's ideal woman.

UNITED STATES' Miss America Competition celebrates women as...IDEAL

In 1920, bathing beauties were pushed in rolling chairs along the boardwalk in Atlantic City. Samuel Gompers, head of the AFL, told the *New York Times* they were "the type of women America needs to shoulder the responsibilities of homemaking and motherhood." Today, being pretty, poised, and nice are just the price of entry for Miss America hopefuls. Now contestants must be intelligent, be talented performers, and be dedicated to community service and social change. Winners are rewarded with handsome scholarships; Miss America gives more money in scholarships to women than any other single institution in the world—over \$45 million a year. The ethnic diversity of the contestants is impressive, as are the contestant's academic credentials: Deans List, Magna and Summa Cum Laude. The winner in 2002 was an African-American/Cherokee woman who had just been accepted at Harvard Law School.