

INTERVIEW CARLOS GONZALEZ XIMENEZ

Masks, Masquerades and Rituals: Keeping Ancient Culture Alive

By Dr R. L. de Matas



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Tell us about yourself.



I was born in Madrid, Spain, in 1961, to a large family with 13 siblings. My father was the Bank Of Spain's photographer, which allowed me to have contact with the dark room of the photographic laboratory from an early age, and awakened my fascination with photography processing and developing. Although I had been an illustrator and created wild animals' illustrations for nature guides, it was not until I was 20 years old that I decided to pursue photography as a means of creating.

My profession and hobbies were always related to nature. For 30 years, I have been and continue to be an arborist, working in gardens and forests to maintain their health. It is a job that allows me to combine my love for nature with my photography abilities, by capturing the beauty and vitality of natural surroundings in pictures.





Is there something you would like to say about photography in general? For example, what it means for you?

Photography is a powerful visual language that has the ability to transmit emotions, tell stories and capture meaningful moments. Like music or writing, it can affect our senses and reach the soul of its observers. For me, photography has a profound meaning because of my intimate relationship with photographic art. This connection influences my particular approach towards photographic projects.

The beauty of photography and projects resides in the research, travels and adventures that go with them. Through photography, I can explore new places, immerse myself in different cultures and discover unique perspectives. Photography provides me with the opportunity to capture those moments and share my personal view of the world with others.

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What do you like to convey through your photographs?

Through my photographs, I wish to convey ancient knowledge and practices in their artistic forms, especially in relation to masks and traditional garments. By illustrating these cultural manifestations, I seek to share the experiences of their life and work, capturing the world that surrounds it and giving it my personal interpretation.

Photography has the power to transport us to other places—whether through natural landscapes or urban photography—allowing us to explore different worlds and cultures. In my case, I use photography as a way of documenting and giving relevance to rituals and their meanings, which often are unnoticed in everyday life. Through my pictures, I capture fleeting moments and preserve them for their study and appreciation.

I have always felt the need to collect the world that surrounds me and reinterpret it, in a way. While my youth focused on making animals illustrations for nature books, I found in photography a faster and more faithful way to capture reality. Although I could have also chosen to express myself through poetry, sculpture or theatre, the photographic image provides me with the opportunity to freeze a moment and convey its vision in an impactful way.

My objective is to give importance and worth to rituals and traditions through photographs, capturing the essence of these ancient practices and sharing them with others. By doing this, it enables the appreciation, study and preservation of these cultural manifestations for future generations.



Do you have any reason to choose traditional or ancient garments and spectacles?

First of all, traditional garments and costumes are part of ancient rituals that have been passed down from generation to generation. These rituals are part of the folklore, and contain symbolic and profound cultural elements. By photographing these garments, you can capture the essence of these traditions and contribute to their preservation and dissemination.

In particular, masks are powerful symbols which represent supernatural and spiritual forces that are present in nature. These masks are used to connect with the divine and sacred, in rituals and ceremonies. Photographing these performances gives you the opportunity to explore the connection between the human and the transcendental, and to capture the energy and magic that surrounds these spectacles.

Also, photography allows you to interpret and document these spectacles in a unique way. Through my personal vision and ability to capture meaningful moments, I can showcase the beauty and depth of these ancient rituals and help highlight their importance to promote a greater understanding and appreciation of these cultural manifestations.

There are several reasons why I choose to photograph garments and traditional or ancient spectacles. The choice to photograph travels and traditional or ancient spectacles, is based upon the importance of preserving culture, appreciating aesthetic, connecting with humanity and exploring cultural diversity.

Cultural preservation: again, these garments and spectacles are part of the cultural heritage of a region or community. Photographing them helps preserve and document these traditions for future generations, providing a way to keep the memory of the roots and cultural identity alive.

Aesthetic value: traditional garments are frequently visually striking and unique. They have their own aesthetic, which reflects the history and beliefs of a community. By capturing these garments in pictures, I can highlight their beauty and convey the aesthetic richness of these traditions.

Human connection: traditional garments and ancient spectacles are usually deep rooted in the community, and have a profound significance for the people that use them. By photographing these events, I can capture the emotion, pride and human connection that is experienced in these celebrations. It is a way to share the history and experiences of people involved.

Cultural exploration: by delving into the world of garments and traditional spectacles, I have the opportunity to explore different cultures and better understand the richness and diversity of our world. Through photography, I can learn about the stories, beliefs and values that are transmitted through these traditions.

It is a way to honour and share the richness of our cultural heritage.



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How would you describe the history behind these remarkable costumes?

Their history dates back to the ancient cultures that have passed on their traditions for generations. These garments and masks are not only ornamental clothing, but they are steeped in the profound cultural and symbolic meaning.

In many cultures, the use of masks and traditional garments is associated with rites of passage. These rituals mark an individual's transition to a new life stage, like reaching adulthood or the assumption of a new social role. Masks and garments are used to represent mythological or spiritual characters, and are an integral part of these rites of passage.

In addition, these costumes are full of magic and power. It is believed that masks have the ability to drive away bad spirits and protect whoever is wearing them. A power to invoke fertility and abundance is also attributed to them, since they are connected with the sacred bond between humans and nature.

Also, the history behind these striking costumes reflects the worldview and beliefs of the cultures from which they are created. They are artistic expressions and rituals that transcend aesthetic and are immersed in the spiritual and sacred. Ancient knowledge is transmitted through garments and masks, the sense of cultural identity is strengthened, and the connection with the divine is honoured.

In summary, the history behind these striking customs, encompasses rites of passage, magical beliefs and the symbolic power of fertility and protection. They are profound cultural manifestations that encapsulate the richness of the traditions that are transmitted from generation to generation.

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Which materials are used to create them, and how are they made? For example, by individuals or communally?

The materials that are used to make these garments and masks vary according to the traditions of the specific festivity. In general, both natural and complex elements for more elaborated designs are employed.

In the carnival festivities and winter celebrations, the use of domestic and wild animals fur is common, such as sheep, goats or foxes. These furs provide a distinctive texture and appearance to the attire, along with horns from animals such as deer, to add striking visual elements.

Vegetable materials, leaves, tree barks and crop remains from the fields and orchards are also used, which can be utilised to create the decorative elements of the masks, such as wreaths or ornaments.

The manufacturing of these garments and masks can be made by both individuals and communities, depending on the tradition and specific culture. In some cases, it is a skill transmitted from generation to generation, where each family or community has their own techniques and knowledge.

Is important to emphasise that the making of these traditional costumes requires a lot of imagination, craftsmanship and a strong desire to preserve ancient techniques. The materials that are used reflect the connection with the natural surroundings and ancient wisdom, looking to preserve the authenticity and essence of these unique cultural manifestations.





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Can you tell me about the atmosphere of these rural communities? How does it compare both to city life and to other places?

The atmosphere in rural communities is definitely different from the one that cities have. The pace of life is calmer, and there is close contact with nature. Silence is more tangible, only interrupted by animal sounds, the wind or water, thus creating a serene and peaceful atmosphere. In contrast with the constant bustle of the city, life in rural communities is imbued with a more intimate connection to the natural surroundings.

Country life is based upon a closed dependence on nature's elements, domestic animals and agriculture. People of these communities usually have a direct relationship with the land and actively participate in agricultural and livestock activities, and life is marked by the seasons, natural cycles and work on the land.

Festivities have a community purpose in rural communities. These celebrations are moments of gathering and union for all the town's population, and are frequently rooted in local tradition, with a profound significance than to simply have fun and be entertained. They serve as opportunities to strengthen communal bonds, preserve costumes and honour cultural traditions.

By contrast, festivals in the city tend to aim more towards leisure and recreation. These celebrations may have a more individual or commercial approach, and entertainment and personal enjoyment are their main objective. Urban festivals are often disconnected from ancient traditions, and have a more contemporary and globalised nature.

It should be noted that the atmosphere and festivities can vary from place to place, both within cities and rural communities. Traditions, costumes and rituals can differ greatly from one region to another, reflecting the cultural diversity and local identity of each place.





Does your role go beyond photography?

As both an author and photographer, my job goes beyond photography, as it includes the objective of archiving ancient traditions. I firmly believe that it is of great value to document and preserve these traditions for future generations.

By gathering my reports and knowledge in a book form, I am actively contributing to filling and preserving these traditions. Books act as tangible registers that can transmit long term information, thus allowing others to dive into the fascinating world of these ancient cultural manifestations.

When books are shared, they become a powerful tool for disseminating and keeping alive the richness of these traditions over time. By providing detailed and visually attractive information, books help create a greater recognition and respect towards these cultural manifestations. I believe in the power of books as means to spread knowledge, sensitise people and preserve traditions for future generations.

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Are there any aspects in the representations and ancient costumes that particularly attract you?



The aspect that of representations and ancient costumes that I find particularly compelling is the transformation that occurs when a person wears a mask. This symbolic and psychological transformation is fascinating, as it allows the individual to be immersed in a different character and to experiment a kind of metamorphosis.

When someone wears a mask, they can break free from their everyday identity and dive into a certain degree of anonymity, allowing them to explore different personality aspects, release inhibitions and express emotions in a freer and more enigmatic way. Masks become a medium to hide the individual self and give way to a more archetypal and collective expression.

In addition, the transformation that occurs with the mask also has a powerful impact on spectators. By seeing someone with a mask, the mind goes into an unknown and mysterious territory. The mask becomes a portal that connects us with the sacred, spiritual and ancient world.

I am fascinated by how a simple work of art can have the power of altering our perception and taking us to a more profound and symbolic kingdom of the human experience.



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Is there a connection between ritual, the community, the spiritual heritage and ancient traditions?

Yes, there is a profound connection between ritual, the community, the spiritual heritage and ancient traditions. These elements are intrinsically intertwined and reinforce each other throughout time.

Rituals have a key role in ancient traditions: they are ceremonial practices transmitted from generation to generation, and have a symbolic and spiritual meaning and can be related to agriculture, hunting, natural cycles, the passage of life or important events in the community. Through rituals, a link with the sacred is established, cultural identity is strengthened and community cohesion is promoted.

The community also plays a vital role in the preservation and transmission of ancient traditions. Traditions are shared and practiced by a group of people with a shared history, culture and common identity. The community then becomes the vehicle to keeping those traditions alive, passing them down through generations and preserving their authenticity.

Spiritual heritage is intertwined with ancient traditions as rituals and traditional practices often have a spiritual or religious dimension. The connection with the sacred, ancestors, and gods or forces of nature, are an integral part of this.

Throughout history, ancient traditions have faced external influences and have evolved in order to adapt to different periods and contexts. They may have been influenced by colonisations, dominant religions or political changes, but nevertheless, despite these influences ancient traditions have managed to survive and remain, thanks to a great community resilience and their ability to adapt without losing their essence.

The connection between ritual, the community, spiritual heritage and ancient traditions is an unbreakable chain.







Do these rituals have a connection with other traditions?

Indeed, rituals and ancient traditions in the Iberian Peninsula have connections with other traditions because of the cultural influences and colonisations that have occurred throughout history. For centuries, different groups and cultures have left a mark in the region, merging with local traditions and enhancing the cultural repertoire of the peninsula.

One of the most outstanding influences come from the Celts, who inhabited the region for an extensive time period. The fusion of Celtic traditions with local cultures, like the Iberians and Romans, created a unique mix of rituals and practices.

The Romans arrival also had a significant impact on Iberian traditions. The Romans introduced their culture, religion and festivities, which were mixed with pre-existing traditions. This cultural syncretism led to new manifestations and adaptations of ancient rituals.

Likewise, Germanic influences also left a mark on the Iberian Peninsula. Germans contributed with their own ritual practices and beliefs, which were again intertwined with local traditions, enriching them even more.

The arrival of Christianity also had an important impact in ancient traditions. In many cases, the Church tried to suppress or replace certain pagan rituals but, over time, many were assimilated and given a Christian meaning, such as Christmas festivities or celebrations of saints.

In summary, rituals and ancient traditions of the Iberian Peninsula are connected with other traditions, due to the cultural influences which have occurred throughout history. Celtic, Roman, Germanic and Christian influences are intertwined in a cultural diverse mosaic, in which certain unique elements and adaptations of ancient practices are appreciated. This interconnection enriches the cultural and spiritual heritage of the region.



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Besides rituals, which other traditions do you find fascinating?



As for culture and traditions, I live in a privileged region, which has provided me with the opportunity to explore an ample variety of festivities and traditional practices. One of the traditions that fascinates me is the celebration for the Corpus Christi. During this festivity, streets are decorated with stunning flower carpets and vegetable decorations, creating beautiful designs and patterns. Regional attires also have a prominent role in these celebrations, with vibrant colours and elaborate details that reflect the cultural identity of each region.

I am also interested in equestrian traditions – some festivals feature the tradition of cutting a horse's man, which has a symbolic and important cultural meaning. These horse-related and equestrian practices are a reflection of the profound connection between the rural world and animals, and I find the process of witnessing and documenting these moments fascinating.

In addition, I find pagan traditions that still survive in some rural zones very compelling. These festivities are rooted in ancient beliefs and are usually related with natural cycles, like the summer solstice or spring equinox. They are magical moments in which rituals are carried out, paying tribute to nature and the elements.

Overall, I am attracted by the diversity of both pagan and Christian traditions that are found in a rural environment. Each festivity has its own allure and significance, and capturing and sharing the cultural richness that emanates from these traditions through my photographic work inspires me.

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