

de fiesta

Traditional Celebrations of Chiapas

*To my aunt and mother Paula
To my children, Argenis, Paula and
Jimena
To Maria
To my family and friends
To the indigenous towns of Chiapas
and Mexico*

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Photographies of
Raúl Ortega

Text by Elena Poniatowska





A game of mirrors: The Mask and the Death:

Elena Poniatowska

Learn not to photograph was one of the teachings that Raúl Ortega learnt from the indigenous. They prevented him to use the camera. “I traveled a lot, I negotiated endlessly, and sometimes, they didn’t let me take photographs. Some times, I was allowed to be a witness, but sometimes I couldn’t get even that.” Raúl got desperate. He was watching things that excited him, but using the camera was banned. It was demoralizing . One part of Raúl’s heart was happy to be there, but another was constricted because, in the end, the images are the photographer’s crop and they are hardly repeated.

Does giving up make you grow ? Do we learn more from a failure than from a triumph? Could a pause in the path we are walking be beneficial? Could it be that we can achieve a better work by living together without looking for our own benefit, without judging based on our own standards? The answer is yes in Raúl Ortega’s case. When Raúl stopped taking photographs, he built up his spirit, the learning strengthened him, he acquired a new way of being, and he was enriched. To be in contact with the Tzeltales, Tzotziles, Tojolobales, Choles and Zoques indigenous’ intimacy without asking them anything, but their closeness, made Raúl develop his tolerance, and a capacity to muse on things that he didn’t know he had. Before that, he could’ve died before not taking a good photograph. Now, he was letting pass all of those chances, and even though he had to bit his lips with anger, he learnt to wait.

The first thing he saw was poverty, a poverty that has been there for centuries. He learnt very soon, where the rejection and distrust came from. Why would the indigenous give their faces if they had been deprived of it? Which expression could they show to the camera that wasn't the one of the ravages caused by centuries of vexations and abuses?

Raúl butted his head against the walls of suspicion and there's nothing more difficult than knocking them down. Women hid when they saw the camera, there was no protagonist attitude in their diffident behavior. Modestly, they prepared the meals and looked after the children, that was the way they helped their husbands, but it was impossible to make them try to be protagonists! The churches were also a surprise. They were absolutely empty, Raúl was moved, because the saints that he imagined grandiose were just tiny images. "The village is really poor. Here, as in many communities, there are no benches in the church (sometimes there is one in the bottom), but you can smoke in there and you can drink before the saints. The rituals have nothing to do with the Catholic Church, and they continue to be a part of the indigenous' magic world." In Ixtapa and Zinacantán, where they celebrate Asunción Virgin's day—maybe because they are two villages— they prevented Raúl from photographing. He didn't know why. "That is the tradition", "you are going to be rich because of us." Don Antonio—the traditional authority in the town, so old that his wife and sons were already dead— was the one who finally agreed in letting Raúl take some photographs, and then everybody obeyed his order. Don Antonio adduced that it was his last party.



The respect owed to the elderly people was impressive. The elders are the ones that are command there, if they say no, it is a definitive no. The young people could be willing to be photographed and give an impetuous “yes”, but if an elder said “no”, it was a definitive “no”, with no further explanations.

In 1994, Raúl Ortega was sent by La Jornada newspaper to cover the uprising of the EZLN (Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional) for almost two consecutive years. Herman Bellinghausen was the reporter and together they crossed the so called conflict zone. Raúl began to learn the life conditions of the poorest inhabitants of Chiapas, and he realized that to have a book made, he needed a different rhythm, another space, and he realized that he couldn't mix his graphic reporter work with the one for the parties because they had different paces. Besides, it would be very difficult to get newspaper interested in supporting his project. After realizing that, he decided to abandon Mexico City and move to Chiapas.

Years before that, as a consequence of “the ups and downs of life”, Raúl –being a student of Graphic Design– had been offered an administrative job at the Uno más Uno newspaper. There, he was captivated by photography and decided to study in “Casa de las imágenes”. Marta Zarak, Antonio Turok and Carlos Morales were trying to form photographers with a new vision. Raúl had the chance to publish his photographs in Uno más Uno, “obviously without his name on them.” Apart from his own photographs, in 1996 he created a new supplement called “Foto” in

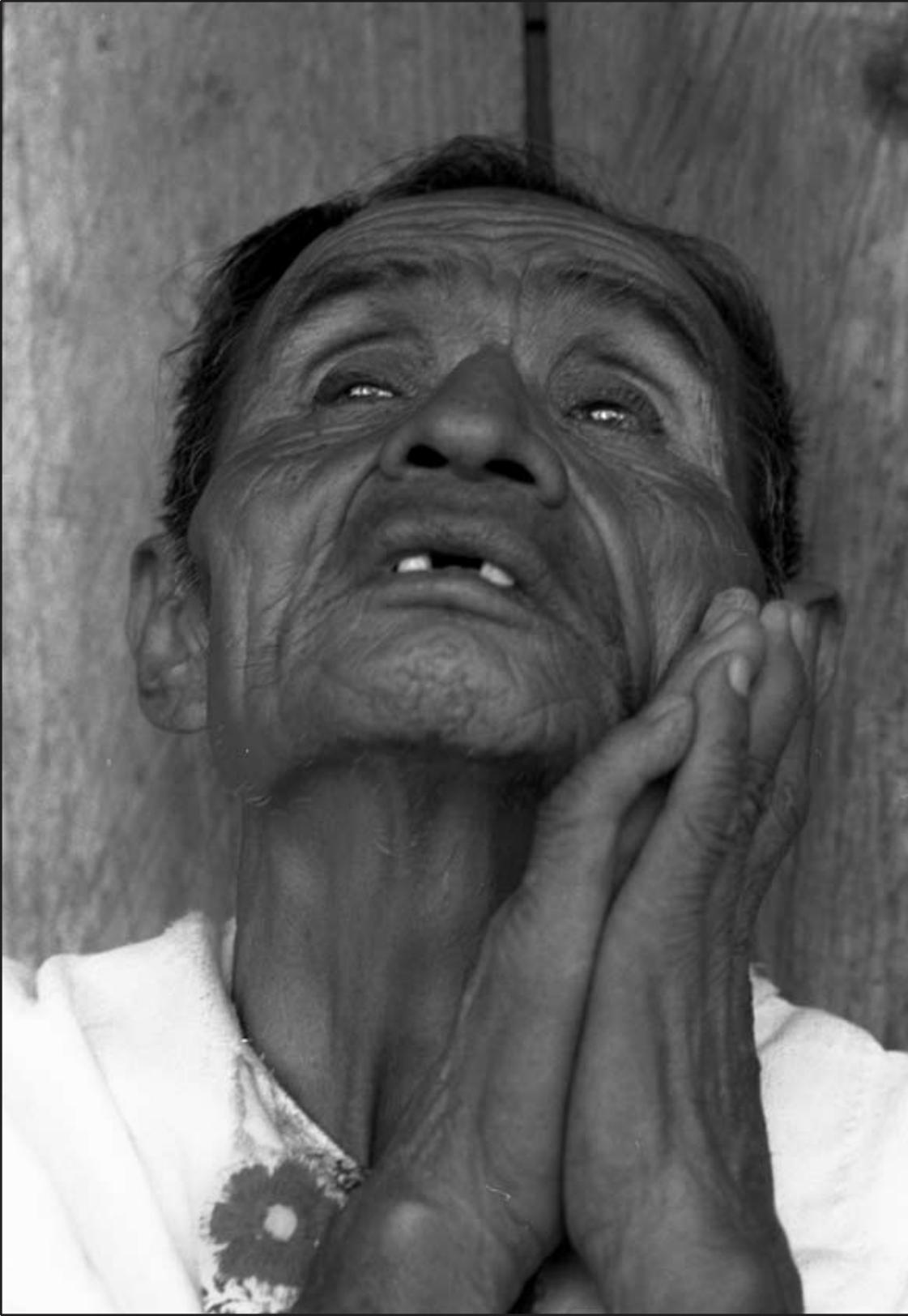
La Jornada, where homage was paid to contemporary great photographers such as Sebastiao Salgado, Marco A. Cruz, Mariana Yampolsky, Graciela Iturbide, Maya Goded. The texts for the publication were written by José Saramago, David Huerta, Juan Villoro and Carlos Monsiváis among others.

Since the appearance of that supplement, Mexican photography acquired a new dimension. Writers wrote texts about photographs, instead of considering the photos as just an illustrative space or just a filling. Mariana Yampolsky said that it was the first time in Mexico that you were able to read from an image.

His resignation to La Jornada made him restate the photographic labor. Not being in a newspaper anymore, he changed his way of looking at things and his way of producing them. His book *De fiesta* confirms it. His commitment is the same, but the rhythm is different. In the newspaper the rhythm is a speedy one, dangerous and circumstantial. In the book, when the author reflects on the others, he discovers himself.

The party is a catharsis, a burst, a crack, a way of overcoming the shame, the shyness and the isolation. The guardian saints chair the party; San Caralampio, San Sebastián, San Andrés, San Juan and Jesus Christ, who is carried by the peasants, lying down in his cross, which has become a sedan chair. Historically, the parties in México are an essential part of life, they reveal what we are because people relieve their inhibitions there. A party can last a day or a week, all depends on the place where the party is being celebrated and on the raise of the





intensity with which the people in the party celebrate. The duration of the party is set by the importance of the saint that is being celebrated and its value has nothing to do with the Catholic Church but with the miracles that he is capable to perform.

During the celebration to Santo Domingo de Guzmán, in Chanal, Raúl arrived punctually to the church and he only found two drunken men.

– What happened with Santo Domingo’s party? – he asked.

– We don’t celebrate it anymore, that saint wasn’t a very good one.

In San Juan Chamula they also ended several saints. If the saint didn’t accomplish what he was expected to, the people dismembered it, they remove his parts until vanishing it. Now the saints have their own “pope mobile-like” protections to avoid any attempt against their integrity.

During San Miguel Arcángel’s party, in Huixtán, children dress up as clowns, not as the clowns in a circus, but with their own imagination; they use grotesque masks that they use to bring out people’s laughter, amidst naughtiness, hops and cabrioles. In the target shooting stands they receive sweets, chewing gums, cigarette packs, cereal boxes and occasionally a key-ring or any other trinket. The flags wave in the air as symbols of faith. Some of them have a wooden cross in their apexes, named “el cruz” (‘the cross’, in Spanish, the article ‘el’ is masculine and the noun ‘cruz’ is feminine. There is also a change in the way to call Santa Teresita, she is a female saint, and people referred to her as if she were a man, they called her “el santo”). The colorful flags announce that the saint is coming accompanied by the authorities. As a matter of fact “toritos” are men with horns to whom fireworks are tied.

Long queues of believers that want to kiss San Miguel Arcángel's clothes or caress their faces with his coat-tail. Among them, women wearing a white rebozo (a long narrow stole or shawl) stand out.

The elders –authorities in the end – fear they will be the last generation that follows the tradition, because young people are not interested in those festivities. “When we die there will be nothing else, the gods will go away and will remain distant.”

In the San Mateo feast, in Chamula, the people of the village disguise and they hide their noble faces behind much less noble faces, such as: Salina's, Fox's or Sadam Hussein's face. They build an arch made of flowers and offer big flower's bouquets. There, the “toritos” (“little bulls” -traditional Mexican fireworks carried by men), wanted to deliver a blow to Raúl, they argued “why are you taking photos of us”, they asked him for money.” He was forced to look for an authority that explained them that he was allowed to take the photos.

In the San Francisco de Asís party, in Tonalá the cattle breeders take yearling calves to the church as presents, and later those calves are locked into a barnyard. Women offer hens that also end up in the church. The visitors take photographs of themselves riding wooden horses with San Francisco's image as background. The girls dressed as chiapanecas (wearing a traditional Chiapas' dress), roam the streets on top of cars' hoods giving sweets away to an admiring and devote audience. Here we have smiles, because girls are always calm, nothing alters them, between them and the gods there is no distance, they're just born, they've just come from heaven and divinity still inspires them.

During the party days, children are baptized and that is the only time when a priest goes to the village. The churches are conceited; they do what they wish to; without a shepherd, the sheep bleat as they think it should be done. The priests show up every now and then, and meanwhile, the flock improvises, displaying an amazing behavior, much more creative than the one dictated by the canons. The juncia (pine branches used for ritual purposes) and the posh (illegal alcoholic beverage) are raised to the altar.

The man is endlessly more visible in the party than the woman, the children also disappear and suddenly, there they are romping among the elders to flee again, just as swallows. They are birds, they lay down on the branches and a second later they are flying again. When the elders pray, or when they practice any of their rituals, the children vanish and a shout denounces their distant presence.

To enter in a party became a personal challenge for Raúl Ortega, because he was rejected. To document the indigenous tradition (before it is lost for ever) was one of his objectives. To achieve it, before going to San Juan Chamula, to celebrate Santa Rosa's party at Huixtán, before going to Tonalá with San Francisco de Asís to Chiapa de Corzo, to San Sebastián, to Amatenango del Valle, to Santiago Apóstol, to Chenalhó, to the carnival. Before all that, Raúl searched for information, he read, he talked to people, he studied, he made a catalogue of parties in Chiapas; organizing them by regions, and he traveled to different zones to ask for permission to go and take pictures. “Many days can go by before getting the authorization. You have to address to the party's council, keepers of the tradition, to the town's



elders and to the mayor-called the constitutional authority. The fourth authority is the Church. You have to talk to everybody, and if any of them disagrees you can hardly continue with the negotiations”.

Resentment for the historical abuse is at the bottom of this rejection. The part is not a spectacle, it is their intimacy with the gods, and they guard this intimacy through the rites and processions. The customs are sacred, a foreigner could upset the gods, and outsiders have no business with their intimate things.

In Nicolás Ruiz, in the center of the state, Ortega was thrown out. “You cannot be here and you better go away because people are pissed off and we can’t be responsible for your safety” they told him. Since the festivities last for several days, mingling was a valuable way to learn. Raúl discovered that the people whose picture he took had a different way of seeing life and handling time from anything he had seen before, when the San Andrés agreements were discussed. He learned from them to take care of the land, to worship death to resist. He was impressed by their way of taking communion with Heaven and Nature and by their dignified attitude towards dispossession and abuse.

During the day, Ortega shared his life with his guide and friend Pascual, but, in the night, he was no longer his brother nor his friend, he turned into a boy filled with resentment who could threaten him with a machete. When the drinks kicked in his complaints had the violence of a lightning. “Why are your eyes green? “Why do you

have a beard and I don’t?” Despite Raul’s explanations, his companion insisted, “But you’ve got a car”. In that moment Ortega represented the oppressor.

The overwhelming poverty turns against not just the others but against itself. However a graffiti written on a wall in la Margaritas warned, “Time might erase the ploughs on the ground and dry up the fruits on the trees, but it will never touch our roots”.

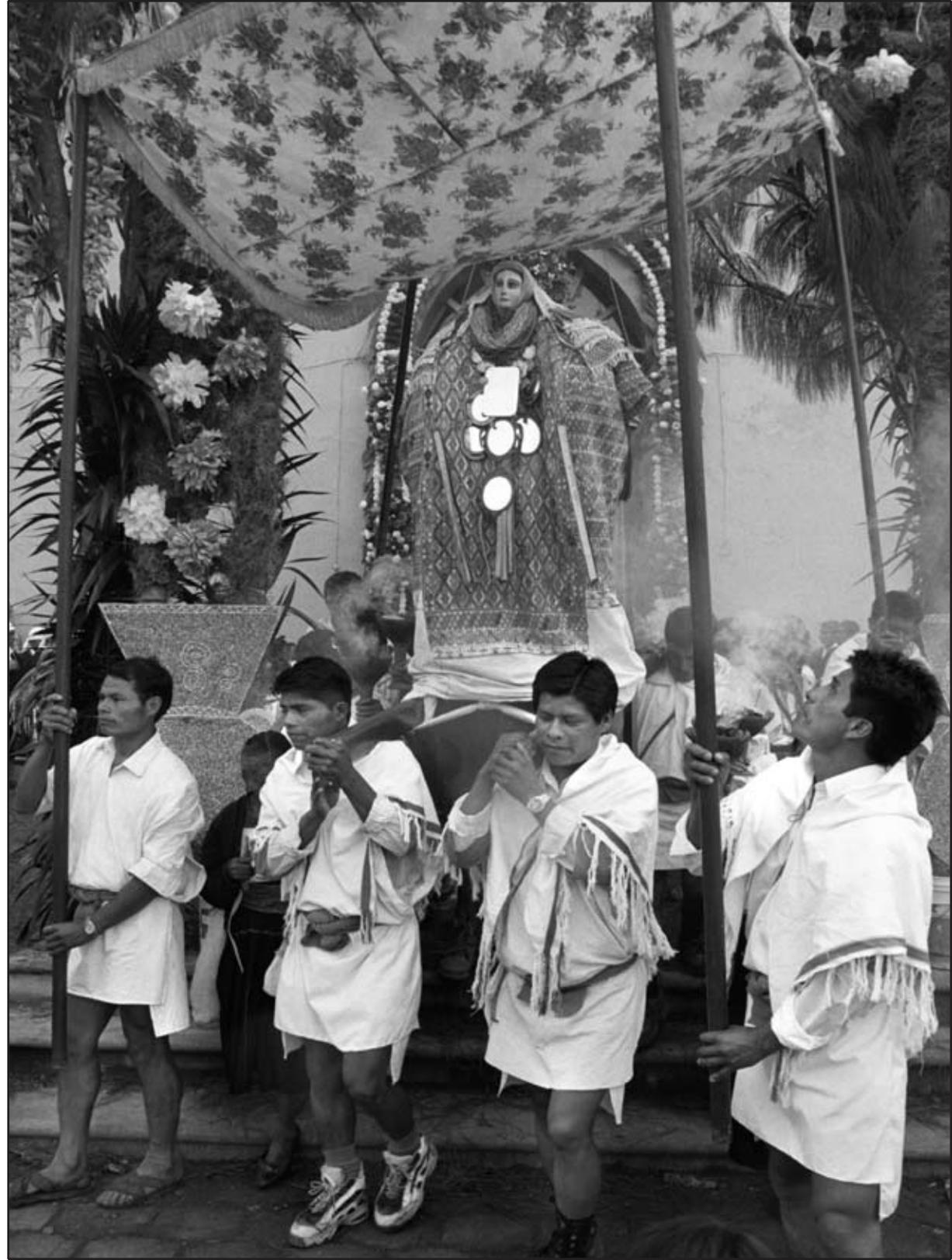
Once in Tenejapa, a group of people walked by behind a boy he was photographing. The angry men came towards him demanding the film. Ortega replied that he wasn’t taking a picture of them, but to no avail “Surely we are in the background and we don’t want to” He had to give them the film.

Without realizing it a photographer can detonate a serious conflict. Someone can defend him and protect him, but the others get irritated and the whole thing is blown out of proportion. Why is that so? Ancient grudges pile up in a small incident that explodes like a bomb. Ortega had not only to watch his mouth but the miles he drove in his little Volkswagen in the bad, muddy roads. He drove for hours and hours, and to be able to resist, he chose not to spend the night in the communities but to come and go everyday during the feast days.

In Santa Rosa Chamula he wasn’t welcome,” Get out, you’re a stranger”. Salvador Gomez Laxail, a former traditional authority was incarcerated and fined for allowing a filmmaker to shoot a video. Salvador argued that the community had to open up and he was condemned. Ortega often heard the same accusation, “You are going to get rich, you’ll sell this in

Europe or the United States and we'll get nothing". The elders recalled some past really bad experience. Perhaps in the past photographers and filmmakers took advantage of them with no concern for their situation, but the Zapatista movement has brought forth awareness. It's not about putting the indigenous -"the smallest of them all" as Subcomandante Marcos calls them- on a pedestal, they have suffered scorn, exploitation and have been vilified with alcohol for far too many years.

The indigenous have been used as a banner for political parties, municipal authorities and governors. But after 500 years it all remains the same. Allegedly, the current government has invested in the communities, but you can't see anything anywhere. People have to travel to the main towns like Ocosingo, Comitán or Las Margaritas to go to a hospital, and when they get there they are received with contempt. If they do well they get a pill and are sent back. Where is the new treatment for the indigenous? Where is the new culture of respect towards them? Where is the equality if there isn't a chance of recovery? In the 21st century, children can make it if they don't die of a curable disease like measles, chicken pox or small pox. In this day and age when man has made it to the Moon and almost to Mars. Computers, digital cameras, miniscule cell phones and on-line fridges are the toys of people in cities while Chiapas' children die of some gastrointestinal fever. The overwhelming First World's Modernity hasn't arrived here. Not even as a simple aspirin to feel a bit better. There are many government speeches based on figures, but in reality the San Andrés agreements have been forgotten, and the communities have been abandoned, not to mention the 40 to 60 thousand soldiers assigned to watch the state.



Rightfully Eduardo Galeano claims “the hindering racism prevents the human condition from shining plentifully in all its colors. The Americas are sick with racism, from north to south it is blind to itself. Latin americans of my generation have been educated by Hollywood. The Indians were bitter-faced, feathered, painted men, dizzy from circling around the pioneers wagons.”

At the carnival of San Andrés Larrainzar, black cocks are hung in front of the church, in Chenalho, turkeys in Tuxtla Chico ducks are beheaded to celebrate San Pedro, “Negritos” beat up those that get in the way of the horses. “Negritos” (little blacks) are adults and children with their faces painted black. In many parties they’re in charge of pouring drinks, painted like that the dare to do the things they wouldn’t do with their real faces. Riders cross the streets collecting ducks given away by ladies that also throw flower petals at them as if in a festivity from the middle ages. In contrast, in other places such as La Concordia, tradition has been lost, it has become a simple cattle fair with a high-heeled, tulle dressed, beauty parlor hairdo queen.

In Alcala peasants dress up as tigers, another man in a deer costume is behind them manning a whip that is used if the tigers get too close. The tigers are quite handsome they are kings, no longer of the jungle, but of creation. Some men paint their faces with cornmeal, others carry an iguana on their shoulders. The iguanas have their mouths stitched so they won’t bite and a tied leg to prevent them from escaping. In Tejenapa a man made an eerie mask out of a football. As Eduardo Galeano puts it “The amazing fruits

are plain for the eye to see in the so called fine arts and in the arts scornfully labeled as crafts, the cultures reduced to folklore and the religions deemed as superstition. These ignored-but not ignorant -roots nourish the everyday life of real people although many times people aren’t aware of them or rather not get to know them. These roots are alive in the languages that reveal what we are through speech or through silence, in our way of eating and cooking, in the tunes that make us dance, in the games that make us play and in the thousand and one secret shared ceremonies that help us to live.”

In places like Chilon, magic cleansings are still performed outside the churches. In Oxchic the Chiapas harp reminds us of Rosario Castellanos, not because she played it, but because she took one to her Mexico City home across Chapultepec forest.

A splendid photo of a group of men with their sombreros, about to start eating their beef broth takes us back to the Last Supper.

In Chamula in the party of the Rosario madonna, Raul was taken aback by a boy with silver stars on his teeth. He asked him to take his picture, he agreed. He told him that his original gold teeth had fallen off and was wearing these while he saved enough to put back the gold ones.

One of the most touching pictures was taken to a woman in Huixtan during the Easter week, kissing the feet of a crucified Christ at the end of a ceremony.

Raúl Ortega knew Chiapas since 1994 and just as Bellinghousen closely identified himself with the zapatista movement. He discovered a different world and wanted to get inside it without the demands and haste of

journalism and its work orders. He felt the urge to comulgate with life and the indigenous way of being, so he started his relationship with the small community peasants. He set out to document the changes brought forth by modernity like the mechanical attractions in small town fairs, junk food, coca cola, Walt Disney's world, his ducks. His convulsed rabbits talking to people despite their remoteness and isolation. The plastic harvest found a fertile market among the indigenous leaning towards the Spidermans and Barbies. The ever spoling commerce has changed the world and has reached the deepest corner of Mexico's south eastern mountains. However men and gods mingle in the processions and you can't tell them apart. Are you not Santa Marta? Could that be San Caralampio. Everyone in an incarnation of the inaccessible great Beyond, all aspiring to have the attributes of the Divine power. The Virgin appears in the blink of an eye, men are her creation, she plays with them. In the moment the Virgin of Asuncion or of Guadalupe decides, the game is over, the faithful will fall to the ground. The black starry sky is the food of men and we all live in an immense heinous poem without knowing it.

Raúl Ortega makes us understand this with his images. In this long path of pilgrims from one party to another we get the crop, the birth the game of mirrors, the mask and the death.

Each of Raul's images blends into another, each one is a fertile seed. And us, the readers receive it with an open mouth and hopeful eyes like when we were children and put out our tongues for the priest to place the white wafer of Holy Communion. ●







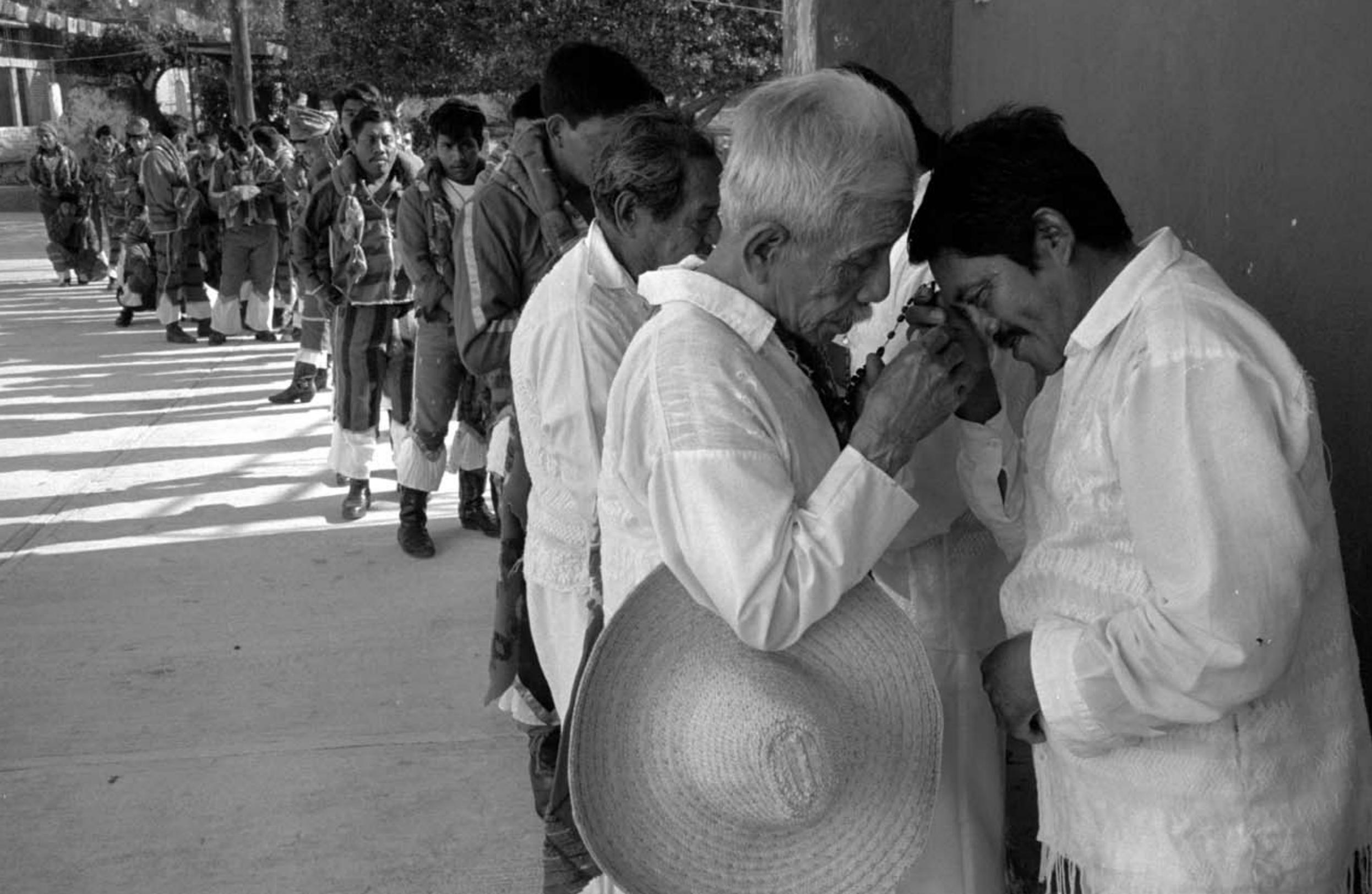


























































































































Carnival. San Andrés Larráinzar

Virgen de Santa Martha.
San Andrés Larráinzar

Virgen de la Percepción. Tenejapa



Corpus Christi. Suchiapa

Santiago Apóstol. Amatenango
del Valle

San Dionisio. Totolapa

Virgen de Guadalupe.
Yabteclúm, Chenalhó

San Martín. San Martín Abasco



San Mateo. San Juan Chamula



Easter. Huixtán



Virgen de la Asunción. Ocuilapa

Virgen de la Magdalena.
Magdalena Aldama

Easter. Huixtán



San Miguel Arcángel. Huixtán

San Sebastián. Venustiano
Carranza

Beginning of the Carnival. Tenejapa



San Miguel Arcángel. Huixtán



San Pedro. Chilón



San Sebastián. Chiapa de Corzo



San Sebastián. Chiapa de Corzo

Santiago Apóstol. Amatenango
del ValleSantiago Apóstol. Amatenango
del Valle

San Sebastián. Chiapa de Corzo



San Sebastián. Chiapa de Corzo



Easter. Huixtán



San Andrés. San Andrés Larráinzar

Virgen de la Magdalena.
Magdalena AldamaVirgen de la Magdalena.
Magdalena Aldama

San Fernando. Magdalena Aldama



San Gabriel. La Concordia



Corpus Christi. Suchiapa

Good Friday.
San Andrés LarráinzarSan Sebastián. Venustiano
Carranza

San Pedro Mártir. Tuxtla Chico

Virgen de la Magdalena.
Magdalena Aldama

Santa Rosa. San Juan Chamula



Virgen de la Percepción. Tenejapa

Santa Teresita del Niño Jesús.
ZacualpaGood Friday.
San Andrés Larráinzar

Corpus Christi. Suchiapa



Virgen de la Asunción. Ixtapa



San Mateo. San Juan Chamula



Carnival. Tenejapa



Carnival. Tenejapa



Virgen de la Asunción. Ixtapa



San Francisco de Asís. Tonalá



San Francisco de Asís. Tonalá

Santiago Apóstol.
Amatenango del Valle

Carnival. Chenalhó



Santo Tomás. Oxchuc



Corpus Christi. Suchiapa



Carnival. Chenalhó

San Bartolomé Apóstol.
Venustiano Carranza

San Pedro. Tuxtla Chico



Carnival. San Andrés Larráinzar



Carnival. San Andrés Larráinzar



Carnival. Pocolum, Tenejapa



Carnival. Pocolum, Tenejapa



San Miguel Arcángel. Huixtán



Señor de Tila. Tila



San Martín. San Martín Abasolo



Carnival. Pocolum, Tenejapa



Easter. Huixtán



San Dionisio. Totolapa



Virgen de la Asunción. Huixtán

Virgen del Rosario. San
Juan Chamula

San Pedro. Chilón



San Miguel Arcángel. Huixtán

Day of All Saints.
San Juan Chamula

Day of All Saints. Tenejapa



Easter. Huixtán



San Miguel Arcángel. Huixtán



Virgen de la Asunción. Ixtapa



Corpus Christi. Suchiapa



Virgen de la Asunción. Ixtapa



San Sebastián. Chiapa de Corzo

Good Friday.
San Andrés Larráinzar

Señor de Tila. Tila

San Cristóbal. San Cristóbal de
las Casas

Carnival. San Andrés Larráinzar



Raúl Ortega (b. México City, 1963) has participated in approximately sixty individual and collective exhibitions in México, Germany, Italy, Belgium, Holland, France, Spain and the United States. His work has been published in numerous magazines and newspapers in Mexico and abroad. Form 1998 to 2000 he coordinated and edited the Foto supplement in La Jornada newspaper.

Among other prizes, he has received the Jury's Special Award of the 1st Photo-report Biennial in 1994; The People's Choice Award in the 4th Photpgraphy Biennial of the Fine Arts Institute in 1996; , The individual Everyday Life Award in the Third Photo-report Biennial in 1999 and The Individual Photo-report and People's Choice Awards of the Fourht Photo-report Biennial in 2001.

He currently works as a freelance photographer for several mexican and international publications.

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