

GALICIA: “THE LAND OF THE MEIGAS”

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ABSTRACT: This research delves into the cultural phenomenon of Meigas, or witches, in the region of Galicia, Spain, and their economic impacts on the local community. The Meigas has a rich and storied history in Galicia, with roots in ancient Celtic and pagan traditions. In modern times, they have transformed, going from being viewed as taboo to being embraced and commercialized as a symbol of the region. They play a significant role in the region's place branding strategy, attracting tourists and promoting the unique cultural heritage of Galicia through the development of popular tourist attractions and related merchandise. This research will examine the history of the Meigas in Galicia, including the evolution of their connotation over time. It will also explore the economic impacts of the Meigas on the local community, including their role as a place brand for Galicia and their contribution to the regional economy. Through a comprehensive analysis of the history and contemporary significance of Meigas in Galician society, this research aims to provide a nuanced and in-depth understanding of this fascinating cultural phenomenon.

KEYWORDS: Meigas; Galicia; Place branding; Cultural identity; Heritage.

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Introduction

This academic paper aims to thoroughly investigate the fascinating cultural phenomenon of "Meigas," which are witches from the region of Galicia in Spain. According to the esteemed "Real Academia Española Diccionario", the term "Meiga" refers to a person who is believed to have entered a pact with the devil and gained extraordinary powers as a result. However, the connotation of this term has undergone a significant transformation over time, and in modern Galicia, it is no longer seen as a negative or taboo concept. Instead, the idea of Meigas has been embraced and commercialized, becoming a symbol of the region and having a tangible impact on the local economy.

This work will examine the rich history of Meigas and their social and economic impacts on the Galician community. It will also delve into the evolution of the perception and utilization of Meigas in Galicia, exploring how they have become an integral part of the cultural identity of the region and how they are now utilized as a place brand for Galicia, attracting visitors and promoting the unique cultural heritage of the area. The goal of this paper is to provide a comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the role of Meigas in modern Galician society.

History Context

Galicia is a region in the northwest of Spain with a long and rich history of magic and mysticism. This history can be traced back to the ancient Celtic and pagan roots of the region, which were preserved by the Celtic community of Gallaecia that inhabited the region prior to the Roman conquest of the Iberian Peninsula, "The ancient Celtic inhabitants of Gallaecia, faded out of history after being conquered by the Romans. However, they did not vanish. They persisted, endured, and continued to exist" (Alberro, 2008).

The cultural traditions and beliefs of the ancient Celts have left a lasting influence on Galicia, which can be seen in the folktales and myths of the region that exhibit similarities to those of Ireland. The "castros," or ancient fortresses, of Galicia, are thought to have been

constructed by pagan "antiguos" and "gentes mágicas", and are believed to be inhabited by Meigas and other magical creatures (Alberro, 2002), these "beliefs", that in Galicia come mostly from the rural areas, are very similar to the ones that people from Ireland also believed in, showing how the Celtic roots are still very present in Galicia "algunas gentes de las zonas rurales los consideran como lugares mágicos donde los seres humanos no pueden encontrarse seguros" said McMahon (1998) when talking about the Irish folks. The castros, which now serve as popular tourist attractions, are a testament to Galicia's Celtic heritage and the enduring influence of these traditions on the region.

The region is also home to a number of monuments inspired by its Celtic past, such as the miners in Coruña, Menhires por la Paz, (Herbert, n.d.), which serve as a tribute to the region's past and a way to reflect on its future.

Meigas, are closely connected to the region's pagan roots. However, it was not until the late medieval period in Spain, specifically in the 17th century, that we have documented evidence of their existence. This is due in large part to the persecution that Meigas faced at the hands of the church during the Inquisition (Tolosana, C. L., 2004). According to Tolosana, most of those who were persecuted were women, and few men with "feminine characteristics". The women who were targeted were typically those over the age of 50 who were considered "independent" for not conforming to societal norms, such as being the head of their household or holding a job.

The church's persecution of Meigas was an attempt to suppress any movements that could empower women and maintain the patriarchal status quo (Tolosana, C. L., 2004). However, in modern times, Meigas have come to be seen as symbols of strength and empowerment for women in Galicia. They have undergone a significant transformation in terms of their connotation and are now celebrated as an integral part of the region's cultural identity. Despite centuries of persecution, the Meigas have survived and continue to be an important part of the cultural fabric of Galicia.

Impacts of the “Meigas” in the region

The cultural phenomenon of Meigas, or witches, in Galicia, Spain, has a wide-reaching influence on the region, going from being viewed as taboo to being celebrated and commercialized as a symbol of the region.

Today, Meigas play a key role in Galicia's place branding efforts, attracting visitors and highlighting the region's unique cultural heritage through the development of popular tourist attractions and related merchandise. In addition to their role in the tourism industry, the Meigas also have a tangible impact on the local economy and society. In the following section, we will delve into the social and economic impacts of Meigas in Galicia, examining how they contribute to the cultural identity and economic well-being of the region.

Social Impacts

The Meigas are a significant cultural force in the region of Galicia, particularly in regard to the empowerment of women. Feminism groups frequently use the Meigas as a symbol in their campaigns to fight injustice and work towards better conditions for women, and the term "Meigas" is often featured in protests and marches as a source of strength and inspiration (Corbelle, 2019). The special connection that the youth of Galicia feel towards the Meigas is indicative of the enduring nature of this folklore tale across generations (attachment 1 and 2).

The case of Maria Soliña, one of the most famous Meigas who was captured by the Inquisition and feared as a witch in medieval times, is a particularly noteworthy example of the social impact of the Meigas. Maria Soliña has since become a symbol of resistance and the ongoing struggle for women's empowerment, inspiring a wide range of music, poetry, and even a film adaptation. She is widely known throughout Galicia and has a statue dedicated to her in Cangas (attachment 3), serving as a testament to her enduring legacy and the fight for women's rights and equality (Cuñarro & Pazos, 2016).

In more rural areas of Galicia, it is still possible to find self-proclaimed Meigas who practice "white magic," or good magic, and offer their services for issues related to love

and luck (Vidal, 2020). These Meigas are particularly popular with people from both Galicia and the north of Portugal. The Meigas continue to inspire people from all around Galicia, regardless of whether they believe in their magical powers or not and have been incorporated into fictional books and art (López, 2022), as a way to connect with their cultural heritage. The meigas have profoundly influenced Galician culture, serving as a deeply rooted cultural symbol and inspiring art and business ventures. They represent the resilience and strength of women in the face of adversity and oppression and continue to be a source of inspiration for those fighting for women's rights and equality.

Economic Impacts

In research from Jiménez-Esquinas, the meigas have had a significant economic impact on the region of Galicia in recent years. The region has undergone significant transformations in terms of its economy, society, and culture, transitioning from a focus on the primary productive sector towards tourism and services. This shift has been driven by external factors such as the growing demand for cultural tourism and the availability of European funds for rural development. As a result, there has been an increase in activities and events related to the Meigas in Galicia, which is known for its rural sites (2013). These activities serve as a form of place branding for the region, attracting both tourists and locals. The Meigas have become an integral part of Galicia's economic landscape, contributing to the local economy through their role in tourism and cultural events. These events and activities provide an opportunity for both visitors and locals to engage with and learn about the rich cultural heritage of the region and help to promote the unique character of Galicia to the world. The Meigas have thus played a vital role in the region's economic development, helping to drive the growth of the tourism and cultural sectors.

➤ **Meigas used in Folklore Parties:**

One of the ways in which the Meigas have had a significant economic impact in the region is through the popularity of folklore parties. These celebrations, centered around the Meigas and the enchanted nature of Galicia, help drive the development of the region's services and infrastructure. By attracting tourists and local visitors, these parties contribute to the growth of the tertiary sector and the overall economic development of the region (Jiménez-Esquinas, 2013). There are many such parties that celebrate the Meigas and the magic of Galicia, and in this section, I will discuss three specific examples. These folklore

parties are an important part of the economic landscape of Galicia, and their continued success is vital for the ongoing growth and development of the region.

The Meigas have had a significant impact on the region through their celebration at various folklore parties. One such party is the Noite Meiga, which takes place on the last Saturday of August in Sarria. At this celebration, people from all around Galicia gather to dance around "queimadas," bonfires that are lit as part of the festivities. This tradition, which has only been celebrated for about 50 years (with exception during Franco's dictatorship), was inspired by a legend believed by the local population. After the Noite Meiga, there are also smaller markets and jam sessions in the same location that gain attraction due to the immense popularity of the Noite Meiga. Actually, the government of Sarria, in their tourism site (Oficina De Turismo De Sarria), uses the Noite Meiga as a way for people to know about the other events, joining all of them together in the articles.

Another example of a folklore party dedicated to the Meigas is the Queimada popular de Cervo, which involves stagings about the meigas and the history surrounding them. The celebration ends with the burning of 1200 liters of "aguardente," a drink that is believed to ward off evil. While this tradition used to end after the aguardente was consumed, there are now many other activities that take place in Cervo as part of the festivities. The success of this celebration has led to the growth of the traditional Market of Cervo, which has become a popular attraction for tourists, even becoming the main attraction (Rey, 2022). The site where the Market takes place has undergone renovations, in a way to be more accessible to people, and more organized for the visitors (La Voz de Galicia, 2005). The market's success can be attributed, in part, to the popularity of the Meigas Festival tradition in Cervo.

Finally, the celebration of San Juan, which takes place all over Galicia but is particularly renowned in La Coruña, is considered the most "magical" night in the region and has a significant impact on tourism, in 2015 was declared "Interés Turístico Internacional" (M. S. López, 2022). On the day of the celebration, wood is distributed on the beaches of Riazor and Orzán, and at midnight, the lighting of a large bonfire takes place while smaller bonfires are lit by thousands of people. Although the party is also correlated to catholicism, due to the name (San Juan is the patron saint of Galicia) the main "hogueras", or bonfires, are often characterized as Meigas (attachment 4), showing their importance to the party and how the main core of the party it's originated by the pagan

roots of the region (Garay, 2022). This celebration has a widespread impact on the people of Galicia, as it is a regional holiday and a time when families and groups of friends gather to celebrate the unique tradition. It is also a popular destination for people from all over Spain who come to Galicia to participate in the celebration (Rodríguez & Carneiro, 2022).

➤ **Meigas used in Tourism**

The Meigas, supernatural beings in Galician folklore, have become a popular attraction for tourists visiting the region. Many tourism companies in Galicia have recognized their interest in these mythical creatures and have begun offering "Meiga lifestyle" services to cater to them. These services often include guided tours to locations where Meigas are rumored to have been seen, as well as the opportunity for tourists to dress like a Meiga with the purchase of specially designed outfits (attachment 5).

In addition to these immersive experiences, "Meiga lifestyle" tours may include visits to self-proclaimed Meigas and tastings of food and drinks believed to protect against witchcraft, such as the traditional Galician drink known as queimada. These tours also frequently include educational components (Turismo de Galicia, 2022) about the history of the Meigas and their mistreatment, as well as information about the use of natural medicines that witches were known for, "También se valora positivamente lo salvaje y lo rural como muestra de «originalidad» y «autenticidad», hay un auge de las medicinas alternativas y naturales, así como cierta visibilización del esoterismo." (Jiménez-Esquinas, 2013). These offerings are particularly popular among international tourists and national tourists, who are drawn to the mystical and mysterious aspects of Galician culture (Lago, 2022).

The popularity of "Meiga lifestyle" services has had a significant and positive impact on the economy of the region. These services contribute to the growth of the tertiary sector and the overall development of the local economy. The cultural significance of the Meigas and Galician folklore in the tourism industry highlights the important role that these traditions play in the economic landscape of the region. The use of Meigas in tourism has become a unique and lucrative aspect of the industry in Galicia, with many tourists seeking out these experiences while visiting the region. These "Meiga lifestyle" offerings

have become a popular way for tourists to learn about and connect with the rich cultural history of Galicia².

➤ **Meigas used in Local Businesses**

The Meigas, supernatural beings in Galician folklore, have had a significant impact on local businesses in the region. It is not uncommon to find restaurants and cafes that are themed around the Meigas or that incorporate elements of witchcraft into their business models. These establishments may offer food with names inspired by spells or decorate their interiors with mystical themes (attachment 6). The popularity of the Meigas among tourists and locals alike has also led to the proliferation of souvenir shops and mystical shops throughout Galicia, which sell small Meiga figurines believed to bring good fortune and luck (attachment 7).

The presence of Meigas in local businesses highlights the enduring cultural significance of these supernatural beings in Galicia. The Meigas have become an integral part of the local economy, with many businesses relying on their appeal to attract customers and drive business (attachment 8). The success of these Meiga-themed businesses has had a significant impact on the development and growth of the local economy, contributing to the overall prosperity of the region. The Meigas have thus become an important part of the economic landscape in Galicia, influencing the success of numerous businesses in the region.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the cultural phenomenon of the Meigas, or Galician witches, has had a lasting and significant impact on the region of Galicia in various ways. Their roots can be traced back to ancient Celtic and pagan traditions, and over time, the connotation of the term "Meigas" has undergone a transformation. Rather than being seen as a negative or taboo concept, the Meigas have come to be embraced and celebrated as symbols of strength and empowerment for women in the face of adversity and oppression (Jiménez-Esquinas, 2013). This transformation has been reflected in the social impacts of the

² Some of the information on this paragraph, are according to the CEO of "Zona Meiga", Aisa Domínguez, company located in Galicia that it's specialized in this topic.

Meigas, which have become a symbol of resistance and empowerment for feminists and other social movements in Galicia.

In addition to their social impacts, the Meigas have also had a notable economic impact on the region through their utilization as a place brand for Galicia. The popularity of the Meigas has helped to attract tourists to the region and promote the unique cultural heritage of Galicia, contributing to the growth of the tertiary sector and overall economic development of the region. The popularity of the Meigas is expected to continue growing, driven in part by the increasing interest in alternative and natural medicines and the growing visibility of esotericism.

The Meigas have also had an impact on the daily lives of Galicians, becoming a part of the region's branding and identity and being present in various aspects of daily life, such as social movements, tourism, and even in the local markets and festivals that are held in honor of the Meigas. The phrase "eu non creo nas meigas, mais habelas, hainas," or "I don't believe in witches, but they do exist," perfectly captures the enduring presence of the Meigas in Galicia's history and culture, which will surely be passed down from generation to generation.

In summary, the Meigas have had a multifaceted impact on the region of Galicia, influencing its social, economic, and cultural landscape. From their ancient pagan roots to their modern-day representation as symbols of empowerment and resistance, the Meigas have remained an integral part of the region's identity and will continue to be so in the future. The Meigas, whether they actually existed or not, have a profound impact on the daily lives of Galicians without them even realizing it, and their popularity is expected to continue growing as they become increasingly visible and celebrated in Galicia and beyond.

Attachments:



Attachment 1 - Protests for women's rights in Lugo (La Voz de Galicia)



Attachment 2 - Merchandise from Feminist Groups from Spain (FEM!)



Attachment 3 - Statue of Maria Soliña in Cangas (Concello de Cangas)



Attachment 4 - Hoguera from the Folklore Party "San Juan" in La Coruña (La Voz de Galicia)



Attachment 5 - Zona Meiga Tours, Tourist Guide dressed as hat was assumed meigas dressed like (Zona Meiga)



Attachment 6 - Restaurant "Terra das Meigas", where they incorporate the Meigas topic into the overall theme of the business, to show that they are an authentic Galicia restaurant (Restaurant Terra das Meigas)



Attachment 7 - Typical Souvenir (Meiga to give luck) from Galicia (La Voz de Galicia)



Attachment 8 - Wine company using the Meigas image and name (Strictly Wine)

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