

The magic of the Magi.

Published in: Hispanic, Dec1998,MasterFILE Complete

Celebrating the Epiphany keeps families tied to centuries-old traditions

When 33-year-old Rosario "Rose" Yzaguirre was a little girl growing up in Laredo, Texas, she and members of her family would receive fruit, candy, and nuts in their stockings on Christmas Day. The "real" presents wouldn't arrive until January 6, the Day of los Reyes Magos, or the Feast of the Three Kings, "The Three Kings were just like Santa Claus but better, because they brought me and my six brothers and sisters gifts, good stuff," Yzaguirre recalls. "They brought us bicycles, dolls, footballs, basketballs, once a record player for my older sister, and a typewriter for my other sister." For Latinos like Yzaguirre, the Christmas holiday doesn't end on December 25 but continues through the new year, and preserving and celebrating this tradition is important.

Now a pharmacist living in Brownsville, Texas, Yzaguirre tries to reconcile the different gift-giving traditions for her young family--a secular one centering on Santa Claus and a religious celebration commemorating the time when wise men presented gifts to the baby Jesus. "Back then, I didn't realize that it was my parents who were buying us presents during the after-Christmas sales," Yzaguirre says, adding that the family grew up poor. "Today, I try to keep the tradition alive with my three children, Marcel, Little Pete, and Richard."

Balthasar, Gaspar, and Melchior

The Feast of los Reyes Magos, the liturgical celebration of the Epiphany on January 6, is based on deep-rooted church tradition and is celebrated throughout Latin America. Exactly how it is celebrated varies from country to country, region to region. This day of celebration is based on a single biblical passage found only in Matthew's gospel. It is from this passage that the entire Western and European tradition of gift giving originally became associated with the celebration of Christmas. The gifts, however, were brought not by a portly, bearded saint in a sleigh pulled by flying reindeer. They were brought by three Magi, or wise men.

According to the Historic Trinity, a Web site operated by the Historic Trinity Lutheran Church in Detroit, Michigan, the Epiphany has been celebrated on January 6 since the year A.D. 215, when Pope Clement of Alexandria announced that the Basilidians commemorated the baptism of Christ on this day. In those days, it was on the Epiphany that the church would

announce the precise dates for which Easter would be celebrated for that year. By the fourth century, January 6 had come to commemorate the birth of Christ, His baptism, the adoration of the Magi, and the miracle at Canna (Christ's first miracle). To this day, old Eastern and orthodox churches celebrate Christmas on January 6.

The word "epiphany" is, in fact, a Greek word meaning "manifestation" or "showing forth." Throughout the Christian world, the Epiphany is known by various names: Old Christmas Day, Twelfth Night, Festival of Lights, Three Kings Day, and the Festival of the Magi. "I remember that when I was growing up, I would look at the stars all during the month of December. I would try to find the ones that represented the Three Kings," recalls Yzaguirre. "My mom would help me and my sister find them. We would also try to find el lucero del nino Dios because my mom would say that's the star that guides them."

By the time of the conquest of the Americas, the feast of the Epiphany had long been established in Spain, where it was often celebrated by a reenactment in play form of the travel and adoration of los Reyes Magos. Although the actual names of the wise men appear nowhere in biblical history, they are known by church tradition as Balthasar, Gaspar, and Melchior. The earliest known record of their names appears in a seventh-century codex found in the National Library of Paris. Also by tradition, they are of different races--one Asian, one Arabic, and one African.

Gold, Frankincense and Myrrh

Nowhere in Latin America is the feast of the Reyes Magos celebrated with more gusto than in Puerto Rico. "Three Kings Day brings out lo mas tipico for Puerto Ricans," says Ruben Sosa Dedos in the calendar archives of the IPRnet's "Guide to the Puerto Rican Experience." "In Puerto Rico, children are told to put grass in a shoebox and put the box under the bed for the camels. In return, the Three Kings will leave the children gifts," Sosa says, adding that food and gifts were the best part of the celebration.

Maria Pabon Lopez, a team leader for Legal Aid of Central Texas, says that January 6 is a time to be with family. "I have my sisters living in Philadelphia, my grandmother in Florida, and my mother in Puerto Rico, and it is sometimes hard to get together. But we always try to do something, especially now that we have Marina, my two-year-old daughter. But growing up in Puerto Rico, we would celebrate by placing grass in a shoebox along with some water for the thirsty, hungry camels," she says. "For the kings, we would leave coquito, a popular drink made out of rum. Of course, our parents would drink it, but we always thought it was the kings."

Gerardo's husband, a native of California, still maintains his family's ties to the Mexican state of Nayarit. The Mexican tradition differs greatly from that of the Caribbean. "My husband, Gerardo Lopez, was born and raised in East Los Angeles, but his family is originally from Mexico. They have a totally different way of celebrating [the Epiphany]."

In the Mexican tradition, the feast is celebrated with gifts and a homemade sweet bread called la rosca de reyes. Traditionally, the ring-shaped bread would be baked with one or more figurines of the baby Jesus inside. In the olden days, the guest who found the figure of the baby Jesus in his or her piece of bread would host a party on February 2, which is the liturgical feast of the presentation of the child Jesus in the temple. This is a feast that coincides in the church calendar with the blessing of the candles and is referred to as Candlemas. Historically, this date symbolized the end of the Christmas season.

For American audiences, a glimpse of this celebration as observed in Mexico was captured in a sequence in the 1994 Alfonso Arau film *Like Water for Chocolate*. In the scene, the long-lost daughter who became a general in the Mexican Revolution finally comes home on January 6, to cut the rosca de reyes. "Residents of large cities of Mexico no longer enjoy this tradition with the same feeling as people in small towns," said cultural writer Juana Vazquez-Gomez in a column in the *Los Angeles Times*. "Before Santa Claus became widely accepted in Mexico during the fifties, there were three wise men who brought gifts to the children on January 6. In many towns, mostly those far from the influence of the capital, the people still recognize and celebrate this day."

In fact, the Latin American regions that still celebrate the Epiphany as a feast with gifts are those that have maintained their colonial Spanish traditions. "I think the Caribbean areas are the ones that have been influenced and kept those traditions from Spain because many regions in Spain still do it that way," says Charito Calvachi Wakefield, author of *Navidad Latinoamerica* (Lancaster, PA: Latin American Creations Publishing, 1999) a bilingual book describing Christmas traditions in 25 Latin American countries. "The puertorriquehos put water and grass under their bed and the children in Cuba also used to put besides the grass and water, tobacco and coffee grains. Isn't that great that in every country they put a little different flavor to it?" Calvachi asks. "Isn't it great how rich our culture is? It isn't really what we do; it's how we do it!"

Calvachi missed the joyous Christmas traditions of her culture after she left her native Ecuador. In an attempt to re-create these celebrations, she looked for a book to help her. When she found none, she wrote her own, complete with traditional songs and prayers. A CD accompanies the book

"I can't re-create anymore what I felt in my country and what everybody feels and does at that time of the year. I had to improvise a little bit to make my American and Hispanic friends live what I used to live when I was in Ecuador," Calvachi says. "I realized that if I pulled everything together, I [would] have everything to make a book that could provide everything for the families to pass on their traditions, to enjoy Christmas the way it should be."

In Cuba, the once festive Day of the Three Kings communal celebrations lasted only about two years under the rule of Communism. Since the pope's visit last January, the traditions are being recaptured. The elderly are an important resource in gathering memories from which to re-create these traditions. In the exile community, however, the tradition never died. In fact, Miami sponsors an annual Three Kings parade for the community. (In 1999 the parade will be held on Sunday, January 10.)

A Star in the East

Latino organizations across the country are adding Three Kings celebrations to their calendars. In Washington, D.C., the Gala Hispanic Theatre will have a family-oriented Three Kings event, with songs, crafts, plays, and food. In other areas, local church celebrations have always included festive community events. Every January 6, for example, the historic San Fernando Cathedral in San Antonio reenacts the day the Three Kings brought gifts to the baby Jesus.

This once strong Pan-Latino celebration has had a tough time surviving in a modern, secular United States, where Santa Claus rules. In Puerto Rico, some lament the commercialization of Christmas and the advent of Santa Claus. In fact, the issue has become so controversial that some pro-independence factions accuse pro-statehood factions of promoting Santa Claus in order to better "Americanize" the population and prepare the island for statehood--all at the expense of poor Balthasar, Gaspar, and Melchior.

"The penetration of the American traditions and images of Santa Claus, snow, [and so on], really occurred in the fifties," says Marcelino Canino, author of several books on Puerto Rican folklore and traditions. Canino says that an upper-class Spaniard who owned a chain of department stores began building elaborate Christmas displays, which attracted people from miles around to see wondrous snow-covered villages in a region of the world that has never seen snow. "It was a question of what would produce money and create an attraction," Canino says.

Today, many Puerto Rican families give gifts on both Christmas and the Epiphany. But many question whether this growing practice actually heightens the anticipation of the arrival of the Reyes Magos for the children. However, says Canino, "Among the poorer, humbler classes, Santa Claus is not as important. They prefer the kings."

Many U.S. Hispanics, seeking to reclaim the cultural traditions of their parents and grandparents, are rediscovering this annual celebration. There is even an on-line site (www.3reyesmagos.org) where Spanish-speaking children can write letters to the wise men and ask for gifts.

Meanwhile, families find creative ways to recapture old traditions. Iris and Israel Soto of New York were concerned about their granddaughter's giddy obsession with Santa Claus and her ignorance of her own cultural heritage. They decided to throw a Dia de los Reyes Magos party after visiting their native Puerto Rico during Christmas. They made traditional foods, hired a Puerto Rican band to sing traditional songs, and showered their granddaughter with gifts. Now they plan to give such a party every year. "When the band came in, the people went wild," recalls Israel in an article in Family Fun Magazine. "People said, 'Wow, I feel like I'm in Puerto Rico.'"

For at least one day, they almost were.

ILLUSTRATION (COLOR)

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