

THREE KINGS DAY  
MULTICULTURAL CONNECTIONS

Educator Resource Guide: THREE KINGS DAY

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CREDITS AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

**Educator Resource Guide: THREE KINGS DAY**

***PART I: Three Kings Day History and Traditions***

*History of the Three Kings Day Tradition*

Although we usually take today's Christmas celebration customs for granted, most of the so-called "traditional" Christmas practices we are familiar with only date back to the 19th century in the United States. It was in the 4th century that the Roman Catholic Church adopted December 25 as the Christmas holiday, choosing a date that coincided with pagan festivals of the Winter solstice. Prior to this date, January 6 was the Christian day of celebration in many parts of Europe, including Spain, Italy, Austria, Germany, and Switzerland. Even today, throughout Europe, the holiday celebration does not end until this date, marking the end of the "twelve days of Christmas" between Christmas and January 6. This is also often referred to as the Twelfth Day.

In the United States, the holiday season for most ends after New Year's Day, however, for some Latinos the festivities continue throughout the months of January and early February. In some Latin American and Caribbean countries, Three Kings Day, or *El Día de Reyes*, is celebrated annually as one of the most joyous days of the holiday season. The day is also sometimes referred to as *El Día de los Tres Reyes Magos* or Day of the Three Wise Kings. Observed on January 6, it is recognized by Christians as the Epiphany, a feast day in the Anglican, Eastern, and Roman Catholic churches that commemorates the biblical story of the Three Kings who followed the star of Bethlehem to bring gifts for the infant Jesus.

Like Christmas or *Navidad*, in some Spanish-speaking countries including Spain, Puerto Rico, Cuba, the Dominican Republic and Mexico among others, Three Kings Day is a religious holiday that has become a popular cultural event. Celebrated with music, singing, family gatherings, and the sharing of food, Three Kings Day is a holiday that conveys the spirit of giving. The tradition promotes a sense of community and emphasizes diversity, sharing, and reciprocity.

### ***The Story of the Three Kings***

During the 1<sup>st</sup> century, astrologers, or seers of the future, foretold the advent of a divine king who was believed to be born God incarnate. Many argued about who would be the divine king as well as when and where he would arrive. The most commonly agreed prediction was that a child would be born and that he would be named Emmanuel, meaning 'God is with us.' Astrologers predicted this child would bring peace and ultimately change the course of history. It is said that the Three Kings may have practiced astrology, and thus may have each seen this prediction forecast in the stars. The Kings are also known as the Three Wise Men or the **Magi**. Magi is plural for **magus**, a word that may refer to shaman or "wise man" and is the origin of the words magic and magician. In ancient Persian cultures, the magi were responsible for funerary and religious rites.

According to the Gospel of Matthew (2:1-13), the only biblical account of the event, the **Magi** came from "the East" to first visit Herod (appointed governor of Judea by the Roman Empire) in Jerusalem, asking him where the new King could be found. Herod, troubled by the news of a new king, sent them to Bethlehem, and asked that they return when they had found him. According to legend, in order to greet the infant Jesus, the Magi traveled over a long distance guided night and day by a brilliant star that shined in the sky.

The legend states that the Star of Bethlehem was located directly overhead of the location where the infant Jesus was born. When they arrived, they appeared before the baby, and offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

### ***The Nativity***



Nacimiento (Nativity), 1996 Collection El Museo del Barrio, NYThe Chase Manhattan Corporation, F99.4.1-21 Installed at El Museo del Barrio, Dec 12, 1999–Jan6, 2000

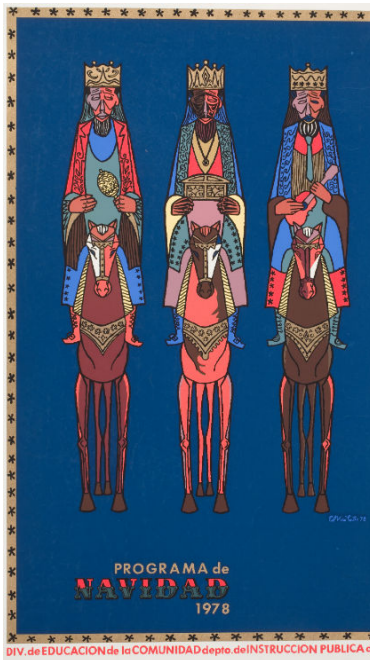
During the holiday season, many Latin Americans and Latinos erect nativities, small or sometimes life-sized figures representing the scene of the birth of Jesus, in their homes, in Churches, and in public spaces. As the legend describes, the nativity scene, known in Spanish as ***el nacimiento***, is usually set in a humble stable, with the figures of Mary and Joseph, as well as shepherds and their animals. The figure of the baby Jesus is added on December 25, the day he was thought to be born.

The **Nativity** refers to the birth of Jesus and the many depictions of the scenery of his birthplace and those who were present. Although he was thought to be as important as a king, he was not a wealthy king who was born in a palace, but rather in a very humble setting. Two legendary stories tell different situations about where the Three Kings discovered the infant Jesus. The most popularly accepted story states that having just traveled back to Bethlehem, where Jesus' father Joseph was from, there was no place for the family to stay. A kind man allowed them to spend the night in his stable. Other stories maintain that Jesus and his family were found sheltered in a cave. When the Three Kings reached the baby Jesus, he was resting on a humble bed of hay in a **manger** or **pesebre**, a trough for feeding animals. The baby's mother, Mary, and his father, Joseph welcomed the Three Kings and received their gifts. Also among them were sheltered animals including sheep, donkeys, and oxen. Curious shepherds were gathered to view the newborn, who they believed to be their divine king.

In parts of Latin America and the United States, Mary and Joseph's search for shelter is re-enacted during **Las Posadas**, a nine-day celebration between December 16 and Christmas Eve. During these special celebrations, a family may host a party at their home to welcome the arrival of a nativity

procession. The family and shepherds seeking shelter, played by children, are followed by musicians and adults who sing carols outside the home. The event concludes with the sharing of traditional foods and the breaking of a *piñata*. Also in Mexico, **pastorelas**, or shepherds' plays, are staged throughout the holidays by professional and amateur groups. These traditional, often improvised, theatrical presentations date back to Mexico's Colonial period, and tell the story of the shepherds' and Three Kings' journey to find the infant Jesus in Bethlehem. In some countries, a special celebration of the nativity is held on January 5, the Eve of Three Kings Day. This day is also referred to as **La Vispera de Reyes**. Children dress up as characters of the nativity and perform in plays or pageants that recount the story. On this day families also add the figures of the Three Kings to the nativity scene in their home or in public spaces. In some cases, like the Three Kings, visitors to the nativity bring gifts of money or food to offer the infant Jesus.

### The Origin and Iconography of the Three Kings



Eduardo Vera Cortéz  
Programa de Navidad,  
1978, Published by: División de  
Educación de la  
Comunidad (DivEdCo)  
Collection El Museo del Barrio, NY

In the story described in the Bible's Book of Matthew, the Three Kings are said to have come from the East. If they were traveling to Bethlehem, then it can be surmised that they came from either Asia or Africa. However, again generations recount the story in a myriad of ways. Christian depictions as early as the 6<sup>th</sup> century represent the Three Kings in Persian garb. In the 13<sup>th</sup> century, Marco Polo's writings refer

to the Kings as having hailed from Persia or present-day Iran. Parts of this story as told today are attributed to another book written in the 14<sup>th</sup> century, *History of the Three Kings*, by the cleric John of Hildesheim, who states that the Kings hail from "Ind, Chaldea, and Persia," referring to InDía, Babylon (or present day Iraq), and Iran. Still other accounts tell of each King having traveled from a different part of the world, specifically Europe, Africa and Asia. It is believed that this version of the story dramatizes the arrival of various nations from different continents into the Christian faith. A similar personal twist has been added to the story in Puerto Rico and other parts of Latin America, where the origin of the Three Kings is believed to represent the three dominant ancestries of the region: Indigenous, African and European.

Although the Bible's Book of Matthew does not specify the total number of kings that came to visit Jesus, nor their names or their specific places of origin, in the West, the Three Kings are widely recognized as Melchior, Caspar, and Balthasar. As the scripture mentions three gifts were offered, perhaps it was assumed that there were three kings.

Melchor (or Melchior) was known to have brought the gift of gold to Jesus. As one of the most precious metals, gold is a symbol of charity, suitably fit to be a gift bestowed for a king. In many accounts Melchor was an Arabic sultan or ruler. In Puerto Rico and other parts of Latin America there represents a Moor or Northern African. In this way, Melchor references the Moorish heritage of Spain since most of Spain was under Moorish rule for eight hundred years. This is still a similar representation as the Moors in Spain spoke Arabic. However in Puerto Rico, he is represented with a dark brown complexion, thus representing not just Northern Africans, but the people of the whole continent of Africa. Melchor's feast day in the Catholic Church is January 7.

Gaspar (also known as Caspar, Casper or Jasper) is usually represented as an emperor of the Orient. He is depicted as a youth of light complexion. Because of his young age he is seldom depicted with a beard. In some cases he is believed to be of Asian origin. Caspar is associated with the gift of frankincense. In Puerto Rico and other parts of Latin America, he is often represented with a bronze complexion and is believed to represent the indigenous heritage of Latin Americans. His feast day in the Catholic Church is January 6.

In European accounts and in some Latin American countries, Balthasar (also known as Baltasar or Baltazar) is depicted as a Nubian prince from Ethiopia. For this reason he is represented as a man with a dark brown complexion. He is believed to have brought the gift of **myrrh**, a resin from trees native to Africa. As Ethiopia is regarded by some as the birthplace of Christianity, it is significant that this region of Africa is represented in the legend. However, considering that in Puerto Rico and some other Latin American countries, Melchior became the King to represent the continent of Africa, the significance of Balthasar changed to represent a king from the West, or rather a European king of a pale complexion. In this way, Balthasar in some parts of Latin America represents the European presence that arrived in the late 15th century. His feast day in the Catholic Church is January 8.

### **The Gifts of the Three Kings**

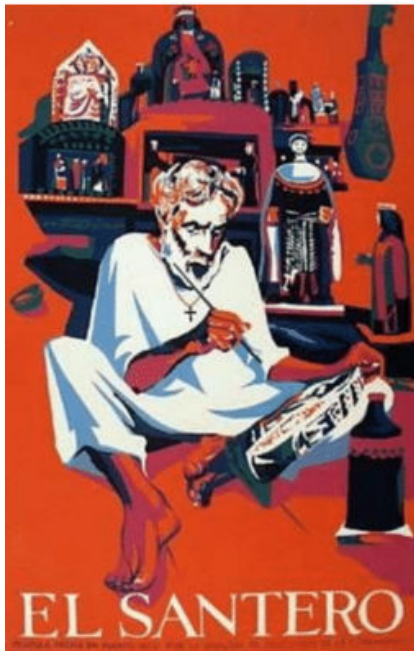
Even though the Three Kings did not know who Jesus was, they predicted that a child who would become king was born in Bethlehem. To honor the infant, the Three Kings carried gifts fit to bestow a king. Legend states that the gifts consisted of gold, myrrh, and frankincense, brought as symbols of charity, hope and faith. Each of the Kings transported their gifts in ciboria, ornate containers or vessels. The Kings did not expect anything in return, other than the opportunity to meet this new baby king. This tradition is slightly different from what we associate with the holidays today as it does not represent a gift exchange. Additionally, the gifts offered by the Three Kings had a much more spiritual or symbolic value rather than a material value.

Many Christians believe that it was Melchor who brought the gift of gold to Jesus, although in some cases this gift is associated with Caspar. Gold is a precious metal that is widely coveted around the earth by different people. It is a symbol of royalty and was offered to Jesus to mark him as an “earthly king.” According to the legend surrounding the holiday, at the time Jesus was born, King Herod learned that three wise men or Magi were searching for a newborn king. Feeling threatened, he demanded that the Magi inform him of the baby king’s whereabouts. Instead, the Magi secretly left Bethlehem, never informing Herod of the baby they had just met. In retaliation, Herod ordered that all baby boys born in Bethlehem be killed. Jesus’ family was instructed to flee to Egypt where he would be safe. It is believed that the gift of gold from the Three Kings financed the family’s long trip to Egypt from Bethlehem.

The gift of **myrrh** is usually associated with Balthasar. Although in the Puerto Rican community he is thought to be of European descent, elsewhere he is commonly viewed as a Nubian king from Ethiopia, a place where myrrh is of high importance and readily available. Myrrh is a type of resin that comes from the sap of a tree in Africa and is collected for the purpose of burning incense mostly. Myrrh is believed to have medicinal and spiritual properties. It is said that Jesus was offered the gift of myrrh because if he accepted it, then it would mark him as a healer. In biblical stories, the child did accept the myrrh and his short life was characterized by miraculous acts in which he was able to heal various people.

In many places in Latin America, **frankincense** was thought to have been brought by King Caspar. In other places, frankincense is associated with King Balthasar. Similar to myrrh, frankincense is collected from the sap of a special tree. It is mostly found in Somalia, a country in North Africa that borders Ethiopia and Kenya, and from the Middle Eastern country of Arabia. In the time of Jesus and the Magi, kings were not necessarily crowned but were instead anointed with precious perfumed oils in a special ceremony. Frankincense has the same association to royalty as it was a precious scent used by important people such as kings and priests. As such, it was used by the Magi to anoint the new baby king. It is said that the gift of frankincense was brought with the intention that if the baby Jesus accepted it, it would mark him as a god. As incense, frankincense is still burned and associated with prayer in many churches throughout the world, including the Roman Catholic Church. Another use for frankincense was found among the Egyptians who burned the charred powder into kohl, a black substance they used to create the thick eyeliner seen in so many examples of Egyptian art.

## **Santos de Palo Carving**



Rafael Tufiño, *El Santero (The Saintcarver)*, 1967

Published by: División de Educación de la Comunidad (DivEdCo), Collection El Museo del Barrio, NY,

Photo by Jason Mandella

Photo courtesy El Museo del Barrio, NY

Throughout the last millennium, images of the Three Kings have graced frescoes, mosaics, murals, canvases, and other works of art. The earliest images date back to catacomb paintings of the 4th century. Many scenes have been recreated by artists as “the adoration of the magi,” depicting the Three Kings' visit to the baby Jesus. Their images have been recreated over and over again throughout the world. Over generations, the three Magi were honored as declared saints in the Catholic Church and are still viewed by some as powerful miracle makers. For this reason, we find a vast amount of representations of the Three Kings within another genre of art, the **Santos de Palo**, or wooden saints tradition of Puerto Rico. This long-standing tradition entails carefully carving and sculpting wood into three distinct miniature forms of the Three Kings. **Santeros**, who are specially trained wood carvers, create these miniature models of the Three Kings, other Catholic saints, and even carvings of the Nativity, a display of the newborn Christ child with his family and adoring visitors.

Many people associate the term *santero* with a practitioner of the Afro-Cuban faith, Santería. However in Puerto Rico, *santero* is the name given to a master saint carver. These saints are carved from wood. They can then be left natural or be painted in bright colors. Almost four hundred *santos* are found in El Museo del Barrio's Permanent Collection. Most were created by Puerto Rican artisans or *santeros*, working from 1850-1940. Many *santeros* were part of families who passed the tradition down for

generations. The Cajigas and the Cabans are two such families. Although this tradition is highly respected in Puerto Rico, carved saints can be found throughout Latin America.

They were inspired by color chromolithographs of saints that were brought to Latin America from Spain. The Spanish would use these images to convert native people and Africans to the Catholic religion. In the early colonial period, there were few churches nearby so it became custom to have a small altar in the home on which these wooden saints would be displayed. During the time of the holidays, Santos de Palo of the Three Kings were often added to these personal altars.



Unidentified artist from Puerto Rico, Los Tres Reyes (The Three Kings), late 19th-early 20th century Collection El Museo del Barrio, NY, Gift of Dr. Victor de León Hernández

The great number of Three Kings' Santos de Palo in existence demonstrates their enormous popularity throughout Latin America and the Caribbean. Today, during the months preceding the holiday festivities, they are usually prominently placed on a communal altar while **velorios de reyes**, vigils, and prayers are observed. Many **trulleros** or **parranderos**, door-to-door carolers, hold the Three Kings' images or bear Santos de Palo figures of the Three Kings in their arms with the hope of bringing good luck and health. Some people even make special promises to the Three Kings to ensure that their prayers or wishes come true. Their prayers are answered, on January 6, that person must fulfill the promise that she/he has made to the Three Kings. People even set off fireworks or build special dedication altars in celebration of this fulfilled wish. This custom is known as **La Promesa de los Reyes**.

The iconography of the Kings and the order in which they are positioned varies slightly based on the place where the figure was carved. But most commonly, as seen in the Puerto Rican carving tradition, King Melchor is centrally positioned between the other two Kings. King Melchor is considered to be the



most generous, which may explain his central position in the group. In Caribbean and Puerto Rican folk art, the Three Kings are depicted riding on horses, once a common mode of travel on the island after the Spanish colonized the region. At the same time, the use of the horse in these figures reflects the environmental reality of the islands, as camels are not found in this tropical climate. Melchor, Gaspar and Balthasar wear elaborate crowns, capes, and regalia, and are often pictured with a single star and carrying the ciboria. The star is an important symbol of their voyage to welcome the infant Jesus, and the ciboria represents the Three Kings' generous nature.

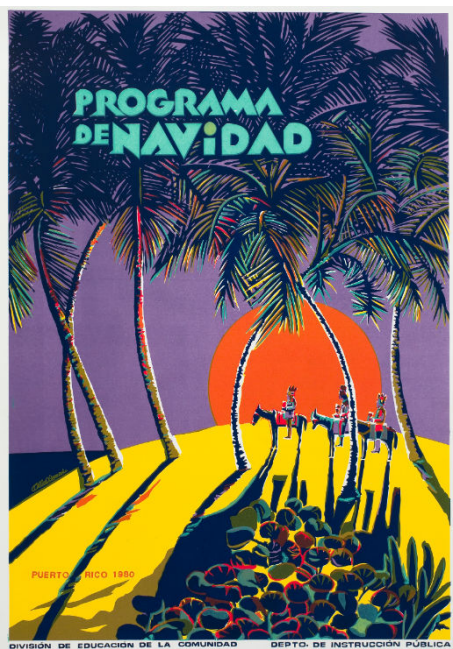
In *Los Tres Reyes*, a work from El Museo's collection shown above, each King appears as a single unit riding on the back of their steeds, and is attached to a small, flat, undecorated wooden base. Kings Balthasar and Gaspar, who ride on black and brown horses, respectively, flank King Melchor, riding on a white or light gray horse. The Three Kings wear long flowing manties and small, cusped or jagged crowns adorn their heads. Each one has their arms outstretched, as if to carry a small box or gift which perhaps was lost over time. Despite the fragility and decay of these wooden sculptures, we are fortunate that fine examples of the Santos de Palo carvings survive today and continue to play an important role in the celebration of the Three Kings Day holiday.

#### Latin American and Caribbean Customs



Antonio Maldonado, Programa de Navidad, 1971, Published by División de Educación de la Comunidad (DivEdCo) Collection, El Museo del Barrio, NY

Many countries throughout Europe have celebrated Three Kings Day for centuries. One such place, Spain, in its colonial rule of Latin America, introduced this holiday and its traditions to this part of the world. Over time, each country adapted and expanded upon the Spanish Three Kings traditions, celebrating in various ways on January 6. Although European in origin, the tradition of Santa Claus and gift exchange on December 25 was not introduced on a mass level in Latin America until the increase of American influence in the 20th century. Furthermore, Santa Claus and his association with snow and the cold North Pole was hard to envision in the tropical climates of Latin America. Although we do find deserts and snow in parts of Latin America, none of these regions are so vast as to have influenced the stories associated with the holidays.



Antonio Maldonado, Programa de Navidad, 1980, Published by División de Educación de la Comunidad (DivEdCo), Collection El Museo del Barrio, NY

Today, many people in Latin America and the Caribbean, and those of Latin American descent living in the United States, continue to follow the Three Kings' tradition. Most notably the traditions of gift giving, singing of **aguinaldos** (holiday carols), **parrandas** (door- to-door caroling), and the sharing of food and sweets embody the kind spirit of the Three Kings. Although some of these customs may vary slightly from place to place, the message of sharing with friends and family is a common theme that is celebrated in similar rich and festive ways.

Mirroring the gifts offered by the Three Kings, many people in Puerto Rico, Mexico, and other Latin American and Caribbean countries exchange gifts or **regalos** on January 6. Although today many people have adopted the U.S. custom of exchanging gifts on Christmas Day, most still reserve a few gifts to open

twelve days later on Three Kings' Day. Young children wait for this day with great anticipation, eagerly waiting to receive special gifts from 'the kings' or their parents, families, and friends.

In Puerto Rico, the spirit of benevolence is returned to the Kings as exemplified by the gifts offered by young children and their parents on the Eve of Three Kings Day. Given the island's tropical climate, the Puerto Rican tradition recognizes that the Kings rode horses instead of camels on their journey. In light of this, on the Eve of Three Kings Day, or **La Vispera de Reyes**, children gather grass, hay, and water and place it in shoeboxes under their beds to feed the Kings' horses. Some children also set out their shoes next to the boxes under the bed. Their parents often set out pastries or sweets for the Three Kings. On Three Kings Day morning, children discover the pastries and food out for the Kings and animals are gone. Instead, the food is replaced with gifts, candy, or nuts that the Kings have left for them. Similarly, in Mexico, children write letters to the Three Kings requesting special gifts analogous to the tradition of writing a letter to Santa Claus. On the Eve of Three Kings Day, children leave their shoes near their bed or window, often filling them with hay for the camels and horses. The next morning, when the children wake up, the hay is gone and the shoes are filled with gifts.



Antonio Maldonado,  
Programa de Navidad,  
1973, Published by División de Educación  
de la Comunidad (DivEdCo),  
Collection El Museo  
del Barrio

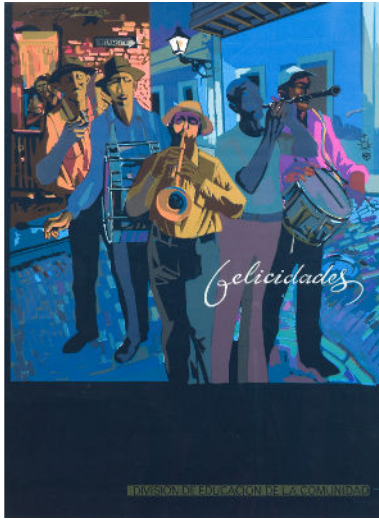
Three Kings Day is a special and significant holiday for adults, as well as their children. During this holiday, it is common for family and friends to have parties and gatherings to feast on food and drink. Although many people in Latin America share traditional cuisines, there are some distinctions between foods that are served and enjoyed by people from different countries for this holiday. For example, in Puerto Rico, people eat savory foods like pasteles, or sweet tamales with meat, as well as *arroz con*

*gandules*, a popular dish consisting of rice and beans. Tasty sweets typically consist of pastries, sweet rice pudding called *arroz con dulce*, and *tembleque*, a molded jello-like sweet made with coconut milk. Frequently in the Caribbean, large groups of friends and family gather for a special feast of *lechón asado*, which is an open-fire pig roast. In addition to being a hearty feast for many, the process of keeping match over the speared *lechón* as it rotates on its axis for many hours, and the group preparation of other foods to be shared, is an integral part of the Three Kings' Day celebration.

In Spain and many Latin American countries, people enjoy '*Rosca*' or '*Roscon de Reyes*', or 'King's Cake' a crown-shaped sweet bread decorated with candied fruits to resemble jewels. Well-loved by many, this bread is filled with nuts, figs, and cherries, and is frequently given and shared as a gift with friends. Hot chocolate often accompanies the *rosca*. Inside the *rosca*, one or more tiny figures of babies are hidden. On January 6, at family gatherings and parties, each guest cuts their own piece of the *rosca*, hoping to avoid the piece with the baby, representing the infant Jesus. In Mexico, those who are unlucky enough to bite into a piece containing the figure are obliged to throw a party on or before February 2, which is called El Día de la Candelaria, or Candlemas, offering *tamales* and *atole* (a hot, sweet drink thickened with cornflour) to their guests. *El Día de la Candelaria* is the "Day of the Candle" or "light, also known as the 'Day of Purification.' In addition to a party thrown by the 'victim' of the *rosca*, this is the day that the Nativity scene is put away, marking the official end of the holiday season. In other countries, finding the baby figure is a promise of good luck for the New Year. Various traditional beverages are served during the holiday season throughout Latin America, the Caribbean, and the United States. In the Puerto Rican tradition, people enjoy *coquito* and *ponche*. *Coquito* is an eggnog drink that can be prepared as a non-alcoholic beverage or mixed with coconut rum. Likewise, fresh *ponche*, or punch can be made and served to adults as a fruity alcoholic or non-alcoholic soft drink. In Mexico, *ponche* (a hot fruit punch), *sidra* (sparkling cider) or other spirits are served for the holiday brindis (toast).

Visiting with family, friends, and neighbors is of central importance in the Latin American and Caribbean tradition and occurs before, during, and after the Three Kings' Day holiday. **Las Octavitas** formally extends the Three Kings' holiday for eight days of continued gatherings. Popular practice states that if a friend, neighbor, or family member visits you on Three Kings' Day, you must return the visit to them eight days later. This exchange of visits is understood as a type of gift or offering and may include song and prayer.

### **Las Parrandas & Musical Traditions**



El Museo del Barrio, 1230 Fifth Avenue NY, NY  
 10029. Rafael Tufiño Felicidades, 1976  
 Silkscreen  
 Published by División de Educación de la  
 Comunidad (DivEdCo) Collection El Museo del  
 Barrio, NY

In Puerto Rico and other Latin American countries, the *parrandas* tradition, door-to-door caroling, entails visiting friends and neighbors door-to-door, singing cheerful holiday carols. In Puerto Rico, *aguinaldos* are traditional songs or offerings commonly sung during the Christmas and Three Kings holiday season. The adult carolers may also play musical instruments like the **güiro**, **cuatro**, and maracas. With early roots in Europe, the aguinaldo songs stem from a religious practice in the Catholic Church liturgy, known as **la misa de aguinaldo**, which is incorporated into Christmas and Three Kings' Day holiday mass services. In the Middle Ages, villancicos, an earlier form of holiday carols, were sung and performed in dramatic plays. Often, a Nativity scene was the backdrop for this musical poetry, equipped with the infant Jesus, his parents, animals, and a singing choir of performers who represented the visiting Three Kings, shepherds, and other patrons.

In Cuba and Puerto Rico, regional peasants or country folk, known as *jíbaros* in Puerto Rico and *aguinaldos* in Cuba began to sing *aguinaldos* in groups called **trullas**. The practice began in the 20th century, and the term **trulla** was derived from *patrulla*, the patrol of the Spanish Civil guard, who roamed the streets to control the people and keep order. These *aguinaldos* derived from traditional Spanish songs but reflected a secular and more romanticized style of music and lyrics. From this, a new form of music emerged among them, called *aguinaldo jíbaro* in Puerto Rico. When *jíbaros* came to San Juan, Puerto Rico's capital city, in the early 19th century, they performed their musical repertoire for the wealthy families of the upper class, including the Governor. In exchange for their serenade, the *jíbaros* received offerings of food and sweets. In Puerto Rico, this type of aguinaldo is popular and is still practiced today, as well as in other Latin American and Caribbean countries, and parts of the United States.



Rafael Rivera Garcia, Con Carlos y la Trulla, 1981, Puerto Rico Division of Comm. Education Poster Collection, Archives Center, National Museum of American History, Behring Center, Smithsonian Institution

Over time, based on this earlier custom of singing, groups of **trulleros**, or **parranderos** performed surprise visits at the houses of friends, family, or neighbors where they carried until the late hours of the evening. These surprise ‘attacks’ of song and musical performance, or **asaltos** (an assault or hold up), are intended to be fun and joyful pranks to wake the family or owner of the home. The *trulla* or *parranda* usually ends early in the morning, between 1 am-5 am. Typically, when the group reaches the last home at dawn, they are rewarded with a hot, delicious sopon, a soup made with rich meats of chicken, pig's feet, or beef.

Much of the aguinaldo music is improvisational and has lyrics that rhyme like poetry. Classified under the musical form called the *seis*, there are two types of musical structures called the *copla* and *decima*, derived from old Spanish verse. The simpler of the two is the *copla*, or quatrain, which is composed of four lines. The *décima*, which is more complex, has ten lines.

For both the *copla* and *décima*, each line has eight syllables. This musical poetry is constructed to engage the group in songs about themes of love, chivalry, and contemporary social issues. The music inspires the active participation of people in the group, who respond to these songs in their own rhyming stanzas that continue the topic or theme and often taunt the vocal leaders in the bunch. These informal performances often take on the form of a verbal duel, known as a *controversia*, between two



singers who attempt to outdo each other with their witty rhymes and friendly insults. These spirited musical traditions continue to be a source of joy and community building for many Caribbean and Latin American people.

### **Three Kings Day Parades and Festivals**

Communities throughout Latin American and the Caribbean, as well as Latino communities in the United States host a variety of Three Kings Day parades and festivals. Dating back to 1884, the town of Juana Díaz has played host to an ever-growing Three Kings Day festival, the largest of its kind in Puerto Rico. The importance and popularity of this celebration led to the founding in 2004 of La Casa Museo de los Santos Reyes, the first museum dedicated solely to the iconography of the Three Kings, located in Juana Díaz. In small towns throughout Latin America, processions including the Three Kings occur on the Eve of Three Kings Day. Following these informal parades, children run home and go to sleep early, eagerly awaiting the arrival of the Three Kings to their own home bearing gifts. Today, diasporic communities throughout the United States, including Miami's Calle Ocho; Williamsburg, Brooklyn; Taos Pueblo, New Mexico; and Goldsboro, North Carolina; to name just a few, are hosts to vibrant Three Kings Day parades and celebrations.

For more than forty years El Museo del Barrio has presented the Three Kings Day Parade on January 6, as well as other educational and public programming, with the purpose of keeping the Three Kings traditions alive. Each year, El Museo's dynamic parade, led by the giant Three Kings puppets, winds through the streets of El Barrio and includes lively music, colorful costumes, animals, floats, and thousands of students and community members as participants. The parade route ends with a gift distribution for the children who have marched in the parade sponsored by generous donors. Leading up to the event, El Museo, along with a steering committee of community leaders nominates "Three Kings" to preside over the Parade. Being chosen as a King is recognition for outstanding social or political achievements within the Latino communities of New York. These honorary Kings, along with selected *madrinos and padrinos*, (godmothers and godfathers) lead the parade through the streets of East Harlem, dressed in elaborate costumes that are cared for by the Museum. The costumes have been dedicated to individuals who have positively impacted Latino communities and have empowered others by their actions.

Over the years, El Museo has presented exhibitions in our galleries that feature artworks from the Museum's Permanent Collection associated with this holiday such as =Santos de Palo, hand-carved wooden statues created by master artisans as posters, posters from the División de Educación de la Comunidad (DIVEDCO) that celebrate the tradition of El Día de los Reyes, and the giant Three Kings puppets. During these three decades, El Museo has distinguished itself as the leading institution in New York City that celebrates and promotes the Three Kings Day tradition.

### **El Museo's Three Kings Day Puppets**



Our gigantic puppets are central to El Museo’s annual Three Kings Parade. In 1978 when we created the parade, museum staff and artists contributed to producing its props and decorations. Our original puppets reflected the Three Kings Day legend and were used in over thirty performances in the cold winter weather. Popular Christian culture depicts the Three Kings arriving in Jerusalem to celebrate the birth of baby Jesus. According to legend, each king brought an offering that came from his respective homeland. King Gaspar brought incense from Asia, King Melchior brought gold from the Middle East, and King Balthazar brought myrrh from Africa.

For our 33rd Annual Three Kings Day Parade, we welcomed our new generation of puppets created by El Museo’s artist educator Polina Porras. These beautiful 12 feet tall creations are made of paper maché, colorful fabrics, and a carefully crafted structure that allows for graceful movement. In addition to the traditional representation, the artist has added a new source and inspiration based on Taíno cosmological traditions. Melchior, who represents the night sky, has black and dark blue clothes and carries a present that symbolizes the celestial dome shaped in the form of a bat—which in Taíno tradition signifies the connection with the ancestors. Gaspar, who represents the connection between the celestial and the underworlds—which in Taíno tradition are connected by the Ceiba tree—wears green and brown clothes and carries as a present the base of a Ceiba tree trunk. Balthazar, who represents the underworld, wears light blue and turquoise clothes and carries as a present a seashell with a turtle coming out of it, which represents the birth of Taíno culture.

The synergy of the Christian and Taíno traditions wonderfully embodied by our new puppets perfectly synthesize the unique cultural mix that characterizes our community as well as El Museo del Barrio’s mission.

## ***PART II. Preparing for Your Visit to El Museo del Barrio***

### **Group Discussion: What do we know about Three Kings Day?**

Use the following questions to gauge the group's familiarity with Three Kings Day.

1. Has anyone ever heard of Three Kings Day? What do you know about it?
2. Do you or anyone you know celebrate Three Kings Day? How do you celebrate?
3. How does your family celebrate the holidays? How is this similar to or different from Three Kings Day?

Based on everyone's answers, fill in unknown areas of information, explaining a brief history of Three Kings celebrations and traditions. You may wish to show images of the Three Kings, *palos de santo*, *parrandas*, or *nacimientos*.

### **Extension Activity**



Ask students to research and write a brief report about Three Kings Day traditions and contemporary customs. Students may pick one element of the tradition to research in-depth. Ask students to share their findings with the class.

### *PART III. Linking Three Kings Day Content with a Visit to El Museo*



Costumes designed by Emilio Sosa

El Museo del Barrio offers Three Kings Day-themed programs, which explore the concepts of tradition and gift giving. By using activities and discussions, Guided Tours and Hands-on Workshops provide multiple entry points into discovering the art and customs of the celebration.

Guided Tours focus on a series of puppets and costumes made for El Museo, which contain traditional and topical elements while Hands-on Workshops explore themes from the Guided Tour through art-making.

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#### **Post—Museum Visit**

After visiting the museum with your students, follow up in the classroom about what students learned during the museum visit and what was most interesting and memorable. Write down everyone's responses about what they learned about the Three Kings Day celebration and traditions. Use the following activities to continue the conversation!

#### **Activity 1: Maracas**



During the holiday season many Latin American or Latino people participate in *parrandas*, the lively caroling sessions that take song, music and fun from house to house. Maracas, an indigenous instrument in Latin America, are often incorporated into the *parrandas*. Most maracas are made from a round gourd called an *higuera* or *totuma*. It is hollowed out and filled with seeds so that it rattles. Make your own maracas to bring to El Museo's annual Three Kings festival so that you can contribute musically to the celebration!

**Materials:**

- 1 small cardboard tube (the tube from a toilet paper roll, or half of a paper towel roll)
- A sheet of colored paper, (such as construction or printer paper)
- Assorted stickers, stars, glitter, sequins, designs, etc.
- Markers, pens, crayons
- Glue

**Possible materials for maraca filling:**

Different materials can make different sounds in your maraca!

Try filling your maraca with

materials like the ones below, and pick your favorite

- Dried Rice
- Dried *gandules* (Pigeon peas) or dried peas
- Birdseeds
- Buttons

**Procedure:**

1. First, select your cardboard tube, your colored paper, and your maraca filling.

2. Before you can play it, use them to decorate your maraca. We use these instruments in our Three Kings Day celebration, but you can use any holiday or theme to decorate your instrument. Layer designs, symbols or messages on one side of your paper.

You can use glue to add sequins, glitter, or jewels.

3. Once that is dry, flip it over so you can see the blank side. Place your cardboard tube in the middle of the paper. Now, roll up the paper around the long-side of the tube. The paper should cover the entire side of the tube, but you should still be able to see through it (like a telescope).



4. Next, tightly twist one of the sides of the paper around the tube, so one side is open and the other one is closed.

5. What maraca fillings did you choose? Pour the filling in through the open end. Fill the maraca one-third of the way to make sure that the fillings have room to move around and make noise. Make sure none of the fillings come out of the twisted side.

6. The next step is to twist the paper on the other side of the tube. Your maraca will be completely closed. Make sure both ends are tightly twisted so your fillings stay inside. And now your maraca is complete!

7. Now, it is time to shake your maraca! Have everyone play theirs together- do they sound the same?

8. The last step is to join us at the parade with your maraca on **January 6th!**

### **Activity 2: Three Kings Day Crowns**

Like the Three Kings, children and adults who march in El Museo's Three Kings Day Parade wear headdresses and crowns to commemorate the occasion. Using the materials and instructions listed below, students can create their own crown to bring to the parade. Children may need help from a teacher, parent, or partner to complete the activity.



Before getting started, gather the following materials you will need to complete this activity. Carefully follow the steps to produce your own Three Kings Day crown. Remember to have fun and be creative!

We hope that you will join us for the celebration on January 6th, and proudly wear your festive Three Kings Day crown!

#### **Materials:**

- Scissors
  - Ruler
  - Markers and/or crayons
  - Bright colored construction paper or metallic cardstock paper (24"x 4 ")
- Pencil
  - Elmer's glue
  - Stapler and/or tape
  - Decorative elements: Colored jewels, glitter, sequins, feathers

Enjoy your crown as you become one of El Museo's honorary Kings or Queens! Don't forget to bring your crown with you to El Museo on January 6th!

**Procedure:**

1. Find the crown template on the following page. Using a pair of scissors, cut along the jagged edge of the crown template.
2. Select the desired color of construction paper or gold cardstock paper to create your crown
3. Using a pencil, trace the crown template on the construction paper or gold cardstock.
4. Cut out your crown by cutting along the pencil lines.
5. Next, measure your crown to check for the best fit for your head. Begin by wrapping the crown around your head. Use a pencil to mark where the ends overlap by one inch.
6. Use your scissor to cut off any extra paper.
7. Select the materials you wish to use to decorate your Three Kings Day crown (i.e.: sequins, colored jewels, feathers, and glitter).
8. Use Elmer's glue to attach your decorations to the crown's surface. Be sure to decorate one side of your crown only.
9. Add any final details or designs to your crown using markers and/or crayons.
10. Allow time for the glued materials to dry before handling the crown.



Three Kings Day Parade 2012 - Collection of El Museo del Barrio

**Activity 3: Three Kings Day Capes**

On Three Kings Day, we celebrate the story of the Three Kings, who each traveled from far off lands, but came together to bring gifts to Jesus. On this day, we celebrate the gifts we all bring to our communities and can look like a king or queen while doing so.



Like the Three Kings, children and adults who march in El Museo's Three Kings Day parade can wear special capes, to show what they give to the community. Using the materials and instructions listed below, create your own cape to wear at the parade.

We hope that you will join us for the celebration on January 6th, and proudly wear your festive Three Kings Day cape.

**Materials:**

- A large piece of colored paper, big enough to cover your back
- Scissors
- Crayons, markers, pencils, or other drawing materials
- Construction or patterned paper for decoration
- Cloth for decoration
- Glue or glue sticks

**Procedure:**

1. First, take some time to think about what you contribute to your community. For example, do you play on a team? Do you participate in group activities with your school? Is there something special you do for your family? You can write this down to remember for later.
2. Lay your large piece of paper out on a table or the floor, so that one of the short sides is facing you.
3. Now, fold the top of the piece one third of the way down. This will be the part that goes over your shoulders.
4. To create a space for your head, draw a semicircle with the folded edge as the straight side. Make sure there is space on each side of the semi-circle so the front and back will still be connected. Take a look at the picture above as a reference.
5. Now, carefully cut out this semi-circle with the fold in the middle, so that when you unfold it you have a whole circle.
6. Next, flip the paper over, so the folded port is on the bottom. The hole for your neck should be at the top.
7. Do you remember what you thought of in step 1? How can you show it on your cape? Is there a symbol, or a scene you would like to use? Use the different materials to decorate your cape. If you are using glue or paint, make sure to let it dry before wearing it!
8. Wear your cape by putting the shorter folded part in the front. You are now ready for the parade!



## **PART IV. Vocabulary**

**Aguinaldos:** Holiday carols commonly sung during the Christmas and Three Kings' holiday season. Aguinaldo is a type of folk music played in Puerto Rico, mostly characterized by the sounds of the *jíbaros* or the farmers who lived in the mountains. *Aguinaldos* are improvisational songs with rhyming verses that often address social issues or themes of love, and faith. Within the *aguinaldo* genre are the many celebrated Christmas songs that have come to represent the island's musical traditions around the holidays. Aguinaldo also means offering or gift and is associated with a holiday bonus. In this sense, the music becomes an offering to families and communities during the holiday season.

**Asalto:** Literally means 'an assault' in Spanish, but in the context of the **parrandas** and *trullas* custom, it is a surprise visit or 'assault' of singing and music at the home of a neighbor or friend. This door-to-door caroling often extends into the very late hours of the night and early morning.

**Borikén:** The name the native Taíno people called the island of Puerto Rico meaning 'great land of the valiant and noble lord.' After colonization by the Spanish in the fifteenth century, the island was first named San Juan Bautista (St. John the Baptist), and later changed to Puerto Rico, meaning "rich port."

**Borinquen:** The name Puerto Ricans affectionately use to refer to Puerto Rico which is derived from Borikén, the Taíno word for the island.

**Cuatro:** An instrument in the guitar and lute family which is considered to be the national instrument of Puerto Rico. The modern cuatro has ten strings in five courses, derived from the *cuatro antiguo*, which had four strings, hence the name meaning 'four.' The cuatro is traditionally used in *aguinaldo* or *jibaro* folk music.

**Ciboria:** A metal canister, usually constructed from a precious metal like gold or silver. It is commonly used to store ceremonial materials or liquids, which are decanted for special religious services or occasions associated with spiritual reverence. Though ciboria vary in size and shape, their ornate decorations may include precious stones, gems, or a delicate raised surface relief.

**Crèche:** See nativity. A model or tableau representing the scene of Jesus Christ's birth, displayed in homes, churches, or public places during the Christmas season.

**El Día de Reyes:** The Spanish translation of Three Kings' Day. It is sometimes referred to as Día de los Tres Reyes Magos or Three Wise Kings Day. Greetings to friends often announce joyful greetings *¡Feliz Día de Reyes!* or Happy Three Kings' Day!

**Epiphany:** This feast day is celebrated on January 6 in the Christian calendar. In Medieval and Post-Reformation times, January 6 marked the final day of the twelve days of Christmas. The word is derived from the Greek word *epiphaneia* meaning "manifestation" or "revelation." The observance



originated in the Eastern Catholic Church, and at first celebrated the total revelation of God incarnate in Christ. When this observance spread to the West, it became associated with the visit of the Magi to the infant Jesus (Matthew 2:1, 12), an event that in the West formed the Christmas observance.

**Güiro:** This percussion instrument is believed to have originated with the Taíno people of the Caribbean. It is produced from an open-ended hollow gourd with horizontal lines carved on the outside. These parallel carvings create a ribbed texture on the smooth surface of the gourd. During performance, the *güiro* is held in one hand, while a wooden dowel, or *pua* is held in the other hand and used to scrape over the surface of the ribbed side. It is scraped or strummed in rhythmic motions to produce its distinct ratchet sound. The *güiro* is used in traditional Cuban music such as *danzón*, *cha-cha-cha*, *guajira*, *charanga*, and in traditional Puerto Rican music such as *plena*, *danza*, *bomba*, *jíbaro* (country) music, and others. The Dominican *guajira*, is a similar percussion instrument commonly made of metal with hundreds of indentations rather than ridges.

**Frankincense:** This substance is a strong, pungent aromatic incense that is burned for special spiritual occasions. The smoke vapors of this hard resin have significant meaning because it is believed to provide a blessing. It is meant to visually fill a space and saturate one's sense of smell. It is one of the gifts believed to have been brought by the Three Kings to the infant Jesus.

**Jíbaro:** A term that refers to a peasant, forest or country dweller in Puerto Rico. *Jíbaros* have become an important symbol of the Puerto Rican identity, just as cowboys have been a historical symbol of American culture, *guajiros* for the Cuban culture, *charros* for Mexicans, and *gauchos* for Argentinians.

**Magi:** These priestly men were part of the ancient Zoroastrian hierarchy of Eastern astrologers and interpreters of dreams. Since the passage in the Gospel of Matthew implies that the three kings were “observers of the stars,” most conclude the intended meaning was ‘Zoroastrian astrologers’ and thus the title “Magi” was given to them. Much like the Brahmins of InDía, the Magi were keepers of a cult who exercised considerable political power in the East. Their status was highest during the time in which Zoroastrianism was recognized as the state religion in the region of Persia. Since the Magi possessed rare psychic talents to make predictions and interpret dreams, they were revered advisors who were considered ‘wise men.’ Thus, the Three Kings became known as ‘Wise Men’ or ‘Wise Kings.’ Moreover, their ability to understand divine happenings, such as the advent of the birth of Christ, made their skills appear magical. Hence from ‘Magi, the word ‘magic’ is derived.

**Manger:** A trough for feeding animals used as a crib for the infant Jesus in traditional nativity scenes.

**Maraca:** A musical instrument believed to have originated with the Taíno. It is made from an *higuera*, a round gourd filled with seeds that rattle when shaken.

**Myrrh:** The surface of this aromatic material is similar to that of a walnut. It is a resinous material collected from the sap of trees native to Yemen, Somalia and Ethiopia. The pieces are brittle, semi-transparent, oily, and often show whitish marks and powder. It has been used for ages as an

ingredient in incense, perfume, and for medicinal or embalming purposes. It is believed that King Balthasar gave this gift to the infant Jesus to anoint him as a healer or king and to foreshadow his early death.

**El Nacimiento:** Spanish word for nativity. See definition below.

**Nativity:** The depictions of the scenery of Jesus' birthplace, usually in a stable or cave, and those who were present which traditionally includes the infant Jesus, his parents, Mary and Joseph, farm animals including a rooster, ox, and donkey, shepherds and the Three Kings. Three-dimensional nativity figures or live nativity scenes are often staged during the holiday season in homes, churches and public spaces. Traditionally, the infant Jesus figure is added to the scene on December 25 and the Three Kings on January 6, the feast of the Epiphany.

**New Testament:** The second part of the Christian Bible, written originally in Greek and recording the life and teachings of Jesus and his earliest followers. It includes the four Gospels, the Acts of the Apostles, twenty-one epistles by St. Paul and others, and the book of Revelation.

**Octavitas:** Many people in Puerto Rico prolong the Christmas season or *las navidades* beyond Three Kings' Day. Las Octavitas or "the little eights," signify the eight days after January 6, which are devoted to the adoration of the Christ child, gift giving, and parties. Families and friends exchange visits with neighbors and loved ones and host festive gatherings during this time.

**Old Testament:** The first part of the Christian Bible, comprising thirty-nine books and corresponding approximately to the Hebrew Bible. Most of the books were originally written in Hebrew, some in Aramaic, between about 1,200 and 100 BC. They comprise the chief texts of the law, history, prophecy, and wisdom literature of the ancient people of Israel.

**Parrandas:** During the holiday season in Puerto Rico, and other areas of Latin America, groups of carolers called *parranderos* or *trulleros* go door-to-door and sometimes play instruments to serenade friends, neighbors, and family. On occasion, as part of their *parranda* they perform surprise visits or *asaltos*.

**Pesebre:** Spanish word for manger. See definition above.

**La Promesa de los Reyes:** The 'promise of the kings' is an act whereby a person makes a wish or prayer asking the Three Kings for a miracle and in return they will perform a promised deed. When the prayer or wish is granted, s/he must fulfill the promise made.

**Las Posadas:** Over nine consecutive days, starting on December 16, people celebrate *las posadas*, candlelight processions commemorating the journey of Mary and Joseph to find shelter in Bethlehem. Children and adults dress in costume portraying the characters of the story, including Mary and Joseph, angels, the Three Kings and shepherds and shepherdesses. The procession visits neighborhood homes in their quest for lodging while singing villancicos, or holiday carols. The evening ends with a festive



celebration held at the last home, which welcomes the procession in for food, drink and the smashing of colorful *piñatas*.

**Regalos:** The Spanish word for gifts. The night before Three Kings Day, children gather water and fresh grass and place it in shoeboxes under their beds for the Kings' camels. According to tradition, the Magi reward good children by replacing the grass with gifts.

**Rosca de Reyes (King's Cake):** A sweet cake shared during The Three Kings Day celebration usually in the shape of a crown and decorated to simulate the gems of the Kings.

**Santos de Palo:** These "wooden saints", as they are called, are miniature figurines of Catholic saints, nativity scenes and the Three Kings that are fashioned by **santeros**. The **Santos de Palo** are carefully carved by hand with special tools, finished, and painted with colorful tempera paint.

**Santeros(as):** A master wood carver who creates wooden figurines of the Three Kings and the saints. This tradition is passed down from one generation to the next in families and by groups of craftsmen. *Santero* also refers to a practitioner of the Santería religion.

**Scepter:** A symbolic ornamental staff held by a ruling monarch, a prominent item of royal regalia.

**Sultan:** The sovereign ruler of an Islamic country, especially formerly the head of the Ottoman Empire.

**Spanish Caribbean:** Refers to the Spanish-speaking countries in the Caribbean such as Cuba, Dominican Republic, and Puerto Rico.

**Symbol:** Something, such as an object, picture, or word that stands for or suggests something else by association or resemblance.

**Tableau:** A group of models or motionless figures representing a scene from a story or from history.

**Trullas:** Groups who travel door-to-door to make surprise visits to neighbors and families and sing traditional songs. The term truly was derived from "*patrulla*", the patrol of the Spanish Civil guard, who roamed the streets to control the people and keep order. (See **parrandas**)

**Velorios de los Reyes:** Catholics honor and venerate the Three Kings for their nobility, honor, and example of faith through special gatherings or vigils. People say prayers and chant in recognition of the Kings' great religious belief in Jesus Christ, believed by Christians to be God incarnate.

**Vesper:** An evening prayer; evening.

**La Vispera de Reyes:** The Eve of Three Kings Day, on January 5. On this evening, children eagerly await the arrival of the Kings the following day. Children leave water and hay for the Kings and their camels or horses.

**Villancico:** A song of praise or joy, especially for holiday celebrations such as Christmas or Three Kings Day. Originally a secular genre of music, the *villancico* developed into religious hymns made popular in 16<sup>th</sup> century Spain and its Latin American colonies and used to celebrate Catholic feast days.

**Zoroastrianism:** A monotheistic pre-Islamic religion of ancient Persia founded by Zoroaster in the 6<sup>th</sup> century BC.

## **PART V. Resources**

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### **WEBOGRAPHY**

#### **Aguinaldos and other Holiday Music**

<http://www.elboricua.com/aguinaldos.html>

This page provides the lyrics to various popular *aguinaldos*. Lyrics in Spanish.

<https://latinomusiccafe.com/2014/12/11/latin-music-history-the-aguinaldo-tradition/>

This site shares background information about the history of the *aguinaldos*.

#### **General Information about Christmas and Three Kings Day in Latin America**

[http://www.elboricua.com/pr\\_christmas.html](http://www.elboricua.com/pr_christmas.html)

This page shares Information on how Christmas, traditions, and related customs are celebrated in Puerto Rico.

<https://www.mexconnect.com/>

This page contains numerous links to articles on how the holidays are celebrated throughout Mexico.

<http://www.reyesdejuanadiaz.com/>

This Spanish language website describes the origin and history as well as upcoming events related to the Three Kings Day celebration in Juana Díaz, Puerto Rico, in existence since 1884.

#### **Latin American and Caribbean I Musical Instruments**

<http://americanhistory.si.edu/vidal/about/?id=6>

This website is based on “A Collector's Vision of Puerto Rico,” an exhibition that was on view at the National Museum of American History in the 1990’s. The website examines the collection of Teodoro Vidal, whose 3,200 objects of material culture reflect the history of Puerto Rico. See “Music” for a detailed description and images of Puerto Rican folk instruments.

<https://www.discoverpuertorico.com/article/guide-to-music-puerto-rico>

This website, available in English and Spanish, provides a thorough overview of Puerto Rican music, instruments, and artists. It also includes pre-made playlists with different kinds of Puerto Rican music.

### **Santos de Palo and Santeros**

<https://www.peopleareculture.com/puerto-rican-cultural-traditions/>

This page highlights some specific artists who are skilled in *santo de palo* making.

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