Christmas in Puerto Rico
Today the celebration of Christmas in Puerto Rico is very similar to the American tradition of celebrating Christmas. I would like to share with you some of the traditional ways used in Puerto Rico. Most of their traditions are so meaningful that I would hate to see them disappear. What helps to make me a Puerto Rican are the traditions I learned from the past and the ideas and experiences I carry with me. I am proud of being a Puerto Rican and I am writing this so that Puerto Ricans can learn to express themselves and make it easier for people to understand us. I have written all these customs, recipes, and songs with the idea that they could be part of a school classroom. I hope you will use my book in this way.

Marta Montañez
The Christmas celebration in Puerto Rico lasts for twelve days—from “Nochebuena” (Christmas Eve) through Dia de Reyes (Three Kings Day on Jan. 6). The main celebration takes place not on Christmas Day, but on Dia de Reyes.
A few weeks before Christmas the children put on plays, recite poems and sing for the people in the neighborhood. Donations are given and are used to buy gifts for each other. Some of the gifts are: candy, dolls, small games and homemade clothing.

In the past, many families would spend a lot of time making a Nativity Scene (Nacimiento) for their home. This is a group of carved and painted wooden figures of the Virgin Mary, Baby Jesus, the Three Kings, and others, about six to ten inches tall. The nativity figures are the special "Santos" for the Christmas season, like the patron saints kept in homes throughout the year. Nowadays, however, most families buy the "Nacimiento" in a store, and there are not many carvers left.

On Nochebuena, the festivities begin when the families go out to cut the "Sota de Caballo", a wild tree that grows in the mountains of Puerto Rico. Decorations made out of cotton, foil paper, small pieces of home-made candles and "Verenjena Ciroronas" are used on the tree. "Verenjena Ciroronas" is a small green-flowered plant which turns red after being picked. The house is also decorated with flowers, palm branches and confetti paper.

In Puerto Rico, the Nativity Scene is put underneath the Christmas tree, and not the presents. The Three Kings are not put out with the rest of the Nativity on Nochebuena. They are added later, on January 6—Three Kings Day.
On “Nochebuena” there is a big meal in every house. After the meal, friends and relatives gather together. The children put on a play of the Nativity and break the “Pinata”. The “Pinata” is a cardboard or paper-mache figurine of an animal that is stuffed with small toys, candies and hung from the ceiling. Using long sticks, the children strike the Piñata until it breaks and all the goodies fall out.

The adults receive their gifts of fruits and flowers from the children on Nochebuena, but the children do not get theirs until Dia de Reyes.
Also on Nochebuena, the "Parrandas" begin. A parranda is when a group of friends goes from house to house singing Christmas songs (Aguinaldos). This is like the European tradition of Christmas Carolling. The group sings songs and plays musical instruments outside each house, in the street. Then they are usually invited in, and the family give them holiday foods and hot rum punch. People do not give money to the "parranderos", but only food and good wishes. After they have eaten something, the musicians usually start to play again, only now they play dance music. The family members and the parranderos dance together in the house for a while. If everyone is having a good time, they might stay for several hours. Then, when someone suggests another house, both the parranderos and the family members go together to sing and eat and dance all over again. So the group keeps getting larger and larger, as it travels from house to house.

This way of expressing friendship and good will goes on every night from Nochebuena to Dia de Reyes.
One of the dances that is done at these parties (and at other times during the year) is the “Seis Bombeao”. This is lively and sometimes hilarious. The Seis is a popular Puerto Rican dance rhythm. “Bombeao” means that the dancers interrupt the music by making up improvised, funny, and often rude poems. During the dancing, someone will yell “Bomba!” Then the music stops and the dancer will say his poem, which can be one of the traditional verses, or something about one of the people present, or the government, or anything at all. Then the music starts again and everyone dances. Someone else may reply to the first bomba! with one of his own, and so on. Some of the traditional verses are:

La Luna está clara, la noche serena:
que por muchos años tenga noche buena.

The moon is bright, the night is peaceful for years to come, I wish you a merry Christmas.

Bomba pide el trovador, y yo le meto un bombaso,
Esta pareja, lo que parece es un bagazo.

This singer is asking for a bomba, and I’ll give you a big one,
My partner looks like a chewed up vegetable.

Desde que salí de mi casa, ya no tenía alegría
Porque sabía que iba a bailar con esta porquería.

Ever since I left my house, I have been unhappy
Because I knew I would have to dance with this garbage.
On Nochebuena the parrandas must be over in time for the high mass (Misa de Gallo) at midnight in the local church. This is one of the most important masses of the year, and one of the few times when musical instruments are played at mass. Usually mass has only the singing of hymns, but on Nochebuena and Dia de Reyes, folk instruments — guitars, drums, rhythm instruments — are brought into the church and played to accompany the Aguinaldos. This is a joyful occasion. The church is also beautifully decorated with flowers, candles and a life-size nativity scene. After mass, the parrandas begin again.

On Christmas Day, people who didn’t attend the “Misa de Gallo” the night before usually go to the mass in the morning. The rest of Christmas Day is celebrated by visiting friends and families, having big meals, and starting the parrandas again.

On “Año Nuevo” — New Year’s Eve, families and their friends gather together, have a big meal. At twelve o’clock each member eats twelve grapes plus one for good luck. The grapes represent the twelve months of the year. They are a substitute for wine, which cannot be given to children. Since mass is a principal event of all the holidays, it is also attended on this day.
A procession of the patron saints through the town
Dia de Reyes is the biggest feast of the year; so the day before is spent in getting ready. The family prepares holiday food such as lechon asado, pasteles, and drinks like coquito.

The “Santos” of the Three Kings are put with the Nacimiento under the tree. The children also have special things to do. They must decorate a small box to put under their beds, in which the 3 Kings will leave them a present during the night. The box must be nicely decorated, and have a piece of candy, some fresh green grass, and a small cup of water in it. An extra box or two can be made to put at the godparents’ house, or the grandparents’. The children are supposed to go to bed early, so the Three Kings can come. The belief is that the 3 Kings will come to the house, feed the grass and water to their camels, eat the candy themselves, and leave presents for the children. Anyhow, in the morning the grass and water are gone, and there are presents in the boxes. The presents are not wrapped.

Dia de Reyes itself is the greatest holiday of the year. The children wake up early to see what was left in their boxes. The family first goes to mass, which is the most joyful and glorious mass of the year. Then they may go to visit relatives (where the children may get presents in their extra boxes). The big meal lasts all afternoon, eating and drinking and sharing with guests and visitors all the foods that were prepared. In the evening, parranditas begin again to close the holiday season.
MUSICAL INSTRUMENTS

Instruments in the parranda are often made by the families themselves. Following is a list of some of them:

MARACA — made from the brown shell of the higuera tree which is small and round. After taking out the pulp of the fruit by boring two holes in it, small pebbles are put in the middle of the shell through the holes. Then a handle is attached to the dry fruit shell. The maracas are shaken in different rhythms.

GUIRO (WEE RO) — made of one dried empty marimbo shell, which has a long and oval shape. Small slits are made on the outside of the shell, not cutting all the way through. A fine wire fork is used to strike the slits which creates a rhythmic, rasping sound which beats the time of the music.

CUATRO — a small size guitar with ten strings. Its sounds are sharper and higher than those of a guitar.

CLAVES — two wooden sticks about six inches long that are struck together.

CONGA — a drum sometimes made out of the trunk of a tree with mule hide attached to the opening. It is hit with the hands for different beats.

SEIS BOMBEAO — see page 6

TROVADORES — the people who lead the singing of the Aguinaldos.
## DEFINITIONS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Spanish</th>
<th>English</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Navidad</td>
<td>Christmas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nochebuena</td>
<td>Christmas Eve</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Año Nuevo</td>
<td>New Year</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dia de Los Reyes</td>
<td>Three Kings Day</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parranda</td>
<td>Groups of friends who gather together in every village and go from house to house singing and playing instruments. Usually takes place in the evening, but may be done also during the day.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Aguinaldo</td>
<td>Songs that are sung at Christmas. Also a Christmas time present.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Regálos</td>
<td>Gifts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Higuera</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marimbo</td>
<td>Two kinds of tree from which the fruits are used to make instruments and cooking utensils.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Piñata</td>
<td>A paper mache figurine of an animal that is stuffed with small toys, candies, and hung from the ceiling.</td>
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</tbody>
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Some of the most popular dishes for the holidays are:

Lechon Asado — a small pig, well seasoned and roasted whole on a spit for hours, over a bed of glowing charcoal, until the skin is golden brown and crisp.

Cuchifritos — many different kinds of deep fried foods — vegetable dough filled with meats, boiled bananas, pig’s ears, tongue etc.

Arroz con dulce — rice pudding made with spices and coconut milk

Pasteles — vegetable dough filled with chopped meat and boiled. See recipe.

Coquito — drink of rum and coconut milk. See recipe.

Nueces — all kinds of nuts — peanuts, cashews, pistachios.

All the ingredients used in these dishes are grown right on the island with the exception of rice which is imported from the United States.
PASTELES

This is the most popular Puerto Rican party dish, eaten all over the island. It takes a long time to make, but if you get together with some friends, or your class, it can be a lot of fun. It's delicious. This is my cousin's recipe: it makes about 70 (size 4½ by 7)

FILLING:

5 lbs. lean pork meat without bone
26 green olives pitted
2 tablespoon capers
1 lb lard
½ lb achiote (annato seeds)
2 small cans tomato sauce
1 cup sofrito
1 lb can garbanzos (chick peas) with liquid

MASA (dough)

8 lbs green bananas
3 plantains
3 lbs yautias (like taro)
3 potatos
1 1/2 cups lukewarm milk
1 1/2 tablespoon salt
achiote lard reserved from the filling
70 sheets parchment cooking paper (12 or 15 inches square)
1 small ball of strong string

FILLING:

1. Place the platanos and bananas in hot water to loosen skin and make peeling easier. (for masa)
2. Wash and cut pork into thumb-nail size cubes; with enough water to cover meat, boil meat for 1/2 hour. While meat is cooking, begin peeling vegetables and making sofrito. See recipe.
3. Wash and drain the achiote seeds in a small pan. Heat 1 lb of lard with achiote seeds, and when lard is melted and well colored, strain out seeds. Add half of this melted lard to the meat and put aside the rest to be used in the masa.
4. Saute the sofrito in oil with the salt. After it is sauteed, add tomato sauce, olives and capers. After stirring this for about 2 minutes, add everything to the meat. Cook for about 15 mins and then add garbanzos with liquid. Cook for another 15 minutes, and put aside. Total amount of cooking for meat is about one hour.
MASA

Peel the vegetables and wash them. Grate and mix all the vegetables together, add the extra achiote lard, 1 ½ cups of milk gradually, and salt, mix well, cover and set aside.

To shape the pasteles: put a spoon-full of meat liquid on the paper and spread it out. Then place 3 tablespoons of the filling in the center of the masa. Then put 3 T of the masa in one corner and spread it out about ¼ inch thick.

FOLDING:

Tie the pasteles tightly together in pairs with a string, with the folded sides facing each other.

TO COOK:

In a large vessel heat to boiling point 5 quarts of water with 3 ½ tablespoons salt for each 12 pasteles. Simmer gently for 2 hours. Untie and eat.

All special ingredients — platanos, yautias, cilantro, cooking paper etc. — are available at a large Spanish market.
SOFRITO (a seasoning mixture used in most Puerto Rican foods)
grind together (include juice)
  3 heads peeled garlic
  5 small onions
  15 small sweet peppers (ajices dulces)
  2 green peppers
A handful of leaf coriander (cilantro) (Chinese parsley)
  10 green olives
  5 leaves culantro (ask a Spanish grocery)

Store mixture in refrigerator and use in pasteles, rice and beans, soups etc.
COQUITO
(coconut eggnog for 16)

2 ripe coconuts
2 cups Puerto Rican Rum
1 can (14 ounces) condensed milk or heavy cream
4 egg yolks
ground nutmeg

Grate white meat of 2 fresh coconuts.
Put one cup of white Puerto Rican rum into the electric blender with 1/3 of the coconut. Blend thoroughly at high speed. Strain and squeeze through a cloth.
Put the liquid back into the blender, and repeat twice, adding 1/3 of the coconut each time.
Put 2 cups of the liquid back into the blender, add 4 egg yolks and blend briefly.
Add 1 can condensed milk or 14 oz. cream, one more cup of rum. Refrigerate.
Remove from refrigerator 1/2 hour before serving. Shake, pour into cups. Sprinkle with nutmeg.
PLATANOS MADUROS (RIPE PLANTAINS)

Ripe plantains
2 cups salad oil or lard

Plantains have to be very ripe, with the skin black. Peel and cut them into diagonal slices, cut three-quarters to one inch thick. Heat oil or lard, fry in hot fat until golden brown, turning when necessary. Cooking time is about 15 minutes; remove from pan. Drain on paper and serve hot; sprinkle lightly with salt.

All ingredients for these recipes may be bought in Spanish groceries or markets.
Navidad que vuelve, tradición del año,
Unos van alegre y otros van llorando.
Navidad que vuelve, vuelve las parrandas
En fiestas de reyes, todo el mundo canta.

Hay que tiene todo todo lo que quiere
y sus Navidades siempre son alegres
Hay otros muy pobre, que no tienen nada
solo que prefieren que nunca llegara.

repeat: Navidad que vuelve.......

Traigo un ramillete, traigo un ramillete
de un lindo rosal
Un año que viene y otro que se va (repeat)
Dime que me quiere, dime que me quiere, que me adora mas
Un año que viene y otro que se va (repeat)
Vengo del olivo, vengo del olivo voy para la oliva
Un año que viene y otro que se va (repeat).
AGUINALDO

Abremé la puerta, abremé la puerta,
que estoy en la calle, y dira la gente
que esto es un desaire, y dira la gente
que esto es un desaire.

Chorus:
A las arandelas, a las arandelas,
a las arandelas de mi corazón
a las arandelas, chiquita
a las arandelas, a las arandelas
de mi corazón.

A darte un asalto, a darte un asalto,
venimos cantando, todos bien alegres
con mucho entusiasmo.

Alla dentro veo, alla dentro veo
un bulto tapao. No se sera un
lechon asao, no se si sera
un lechon asao.
ARBOLOTO

Esta noche es Noche Buena
Vamos al monte hermanito
A cortar un arbolito
Porque la noche es serena.

Los reyes y los pastores
Andan siguiendo una estrella
Le cantan a Jesús Niño
Hijo de la virgen bella.

Arbolito, arbolito,
Campanitas te pondré
Quiero que seas bonito
Que al recien nacido
Te voy a ofrecer.

Iremos por el camino,
Caminito de Belen
Iremos porque esta noche
Ha nacido el Niño Rey.
LAS FLORES

Chorus:
Hermoso bouquet
Aquí te traemos
Bellísimas flores
del jardín requerío.
repeat chorus

De todas las flores,
yo te traigo un ramo;
Recibelo bien,
que ese es tu aguinaldo,

Traigo el clavel blanco,
también la azucena,
la dama de noche,
y flor de yerbabuena.

Entre tantas flores,
hoy te saludamos,
como se saludan
el lirio y el nardo.

Entre tantas flores,
yá nos despedimos,
como se despide
el nardo del lirio.
NOCHE DE PAZ (SILENT NIGHT)

Noche de paz, noche de amor,
Todos duerme en derredor
Entre los astros que esparcen su luz
Bella, anunciando al Niño Jesús,
Brilla la estrella de paz,
Brilla la estrella de paz.

Noche de paz, noche de amor.
Ved que bello resplandor
Luce en el rostro de Niño Jesús
En el pesebre, del mundo la luz,
De nuestro gran Redentor,
De nuestro gran Redentor.
DE TIERRA LEJANA

Moderato

MAGOS QUE VINIERON A BER

ANUNCIARON LA LLEGADA DEL MESÍAS Y NO

SOTROS, CON ALEGRIÁ, ANUNCIAMOS HOY TAMBIÉN.

DE TIERRA LEJANA VENIMOS A VERTE.

AL RECENCIACIDO QUE ES REY DE LOS REYES

NOS SIRVE DE QUIZA LA ESTRELLA DE ORIENTE.

ORO LE REGALO PARA ORNAR SUS SIENES
Oh, brillante estrella que anuncias la Aurora,
No nos eal-te nunca tu luz bienhechora.
Gloria en las alturas al hijo de Dios.
Gloria en las alturas y en la tierra amor.