

January 6th - the Alternate Christmas

By Brenda B. Covert



¹ In the United States, the twelve days of Christmas begin on December 13, so that the twelfth day lands on Christmas Day. According to TV, radio, and print advertising, those twelve days are for shopping, shopping, and maybe a little more shopping.

² Other cultures celebrate the twelve days of Christmas too. However, December 25 is considered to be the first day of Christmas, and the twelfth day is January 6. December 25 was adopted in the fourth century by the Western Christian Church as the date of the Feast of Christ's birth. The Eastern Christian Church celebrates January 6 instead. It is believed that this difference resulted in the tradition of the "Twelve Days of Christmas."



³ On January 6 they have the Feast of Epiphany, also called "The Festival of the Three Kings" (or Magi) or simply "Twelfth Day." According to tradition, the names of the kings are Caspar, Melchior, and Balthazar. On the night when Jesus was born, these three kings saw a bright star and followed it to Bethlehem. There they found the infant Jesus and presented him with gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

⁴ To celebrate Three Kings Day in Bavaria and Austria, children dress up as kings from New Year's Day through January 6. They go from door to door holding up a large star, caroling and singing a Three Kings' song. You might say it's a little like the U.S. Halloween custom of trick-or-treating, because the costumed children receive money or sweets. However, these Star Singers are actually collecting charitable donations. At one time the money went to unemployed craftsmen and veterans; nowadays it goes to church or Third World charities.

⁵ In Puerto Rico children receive gifts on Three Kings Day. Their gifts are not delivered by Santa Claus, but by three kings who—like Santa—reward good children. Neither do Puerto Rican children hang stockings by the chimney; rather, they get some hay, straw, or grass and place it in boxes under their beds the night before Three Kings Day. It is food for the kings' camels. Instead of the American tradition of milk for Santa, Puerto Rican children set out a bowl of water for those thirsty camels! In the morning the children look to see what gifts were left by the kings. Good children get candies, sweets, or toys. Naughty children find dirt or charcoal in their boxes.

⁶ In Mexico Three Kings Day is called "el Día de los Reyes." Children hope that the three kings will come bringing gifts for them as they did for the Christ child. The custom in some regions is to leave out shoes into which treasures may be left by the visiting kings.

⁷ The traditional treat for the holiday is the Rosca de Reyes—a crown-shaped sweet bread decorated with jewel-like candied fruits. Before baking, tiny figures of babies are hidden in the dough. Whoever gets a piece of the bread containing a baby is expected to host the next party within a month's time.

⁸ People in France also follow the custom of baking a cake with a surprise inside for Three Kings Day, as do the people of Spain.

- ⁹ Parades and other festivities are held on the eve of Three Kings Day in Spain, where three men dressed as kings ride more often in decorated cars than on camels, and throw tiny hard candies to the children. The children have already written their letters to the "royal postman," much as American children write to Santa. They believe that the royal postman delivers their letters to the three kings.
- ¹⁰ While Spaniards traditionally get together on Christmas Eve to eat, they save the gift exchange for Three Kings Day. Some lucky children receive presents on both Christmas and Three Kings Day!
- ¹¹ The people of Italy celebrate Three Kings Day with a religious service that is usually attended by the entire family. Afterwards children open the gifts brought, not by the three kings, but by La Befana, an ugly witch who rides a broomstick and leaves coal for the naughty children.
- ¹² The people of Chile and other South American countries celebrate Three Kings Day with colorful parades and the tradition of gift-giving as well.
- ¹³ In the Philippines, Christmas celebrations begin December 16 with a religious service, the first of many during the season. People display star lanterns in their windows. The star lantern represents the star of Bethlehem that the three kings followed. Lantern festivals can be found all across the Philippines at this time of year. On January 6, they have parades that present both the three kings and also the wicked King Herod (who according to scripture wanted to kill the newborn babe).
- ¹⁴ If you are one of those people who wish Christmas would never end, you might want to urge your family and friends to celebrate the twelve days of Christmas. You could incorporate some new traditions into your festivities and have an extra-long holiday season!

Name _____



Date _____

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<p>1. Which title best suits this lesson?</p> <p><input type="radio"/> A "What Three Kings Day Means to Me"</p> <p><input type="radio"/> B "Why We Should Celebrate Three Kings Day"</p> <p><input checked="" type="radio"/> C "Customs of Three Kings Day"</p> <p><input type="radio"/> D "The Longest Holiday Ever"</p>	<p>2. Puerto Rico is a territory belonging to _____</p> <p><input type="radio"/> A Cuba</p> <p><input type="radio"/> B Spain</p> <p><input type="radio"/> C Mexico</p> <p><input checked="" type="radio"/> D U.S.A.</p>
<p>3. In how many continents is this holiday celebrated? Name them. <u>4</u></p> <p><u>Europe, North America</u></p> <p><u>South America, Asia</u></p>	<p>4. Which three countries have holiday customs that are similar to Halloween customs in the United States?</p> <p><u>Bavaria, Austria</u></p> <p><u>Italy</u></p>
<p>5. Children in Central and South American countries do not hang stockings by the chimney. Which of the following seems the likeliest reason why they don't?</p> <p><input type="radio"/> A They don't believe in Santa.</p> <p><input checked="" type="radio"/> B They have no chimneys due to the warm climate.</p> <p><input type="radio"/> C They prefer the kinds of gifts that fit into shoes.</p> <p><input type="radio"/> D They don't wear stockings.</p>	<p>6. What one tradition do most of the countries honor for the holiday season?</p> <p><input checked="" type="radio"/> A Beneficent person bestowing gifts on all the good children</p> <p><input type="radio"/> B Having parades</p> <p><input type="radio"/> C Leaving food out for the camels</p> <p><input type="radio"/> D Singing carols</p>
<p>7. Which two countries mentioned in this lesson follow the custom of baking non-edible items inside a dessert?</p> <p><u>Mexico France</u></p>	<p>8. Which country do you surmise to have the longest holiday season?</p> <p><u>Philippines</u></p>