

Mexico's Christmas gifts to the Philippines

ROSES & THORNS By Alejandro R. Roces (The Philippine Star) Updated December 19, 2009 12:00 AM



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We have many old Christmas symbols. Probably the oldest is the Nativity scene, known by its Spanish name *belen*, or Bethlehem.

This is a tradition that is believed to have originated way back in 1223 when St. Francis celebrated Christmas by depicting the Nativity scene complete with live donkey, sheep and ox. By the 17th century, the custom reached Spain, and a century later it was introduced in Mexico from where it was brought to the

Philippines. Originally, the only human figures in the *belen* were the Holy Couple and the Holy Infant. The Three Kings were added during the Epiphany. Like the *belen* some of our prominent Christmas customs either filtered through or originated in Mexico.

The Christmas tree tradition started in the Philippines only during the American colonial rule in the country. But even before that we had a botanical symbol of Christmas — the *Flor de la Noche Buena* (flower of Christmas Eve), a plant that was introduced here from Mexico through the galleon trade. The Aztecs called them *Cuetlaxochitl* and used their bracts or modified leaves to make a reddish dye. Originally, we knew it by the name of *pascua*; but around the world it is commonly known as the poinsettia.

There are two legends that we know behind the *pascua*. One goes that a girl who was separated from her lover died of grief on Christmas Eve. Where her blood fell to the soil sprouted the first poinsettia. The other legend is of a small boy whose only desire was to visit the manger in his village chapel. He felt sadness over the fact that he had no present to give to the newborn Holy Infant. So, he picked up leaves from a bush as his present and miraculously the leaves turned into the star shaped red flower, which became known as the *Flor de la Noche Buena*. It is another example of a Mexican plant that took root in the Philippines.



The story behind how the *pascua* became known as the poinsettia is worth telling. The first American ambassador to Mexico was Dr. Joel Poinsettia, an amateur botanist. In Mexico he fell in love with the plant, and upon his return to the United States began to cultivate it in his greenhouse in South Carolina. The owner of a Philadelphia nursery gave it the scientific name of *Euphorbia poinsettia* or *Poinsettia Pulcherrima*: the name Poinsettia stuck. The poinsettia likely came to the Philippines between 1837 and 1878: In Father Manuel Blanco's magnum opus on Philippine flora made no mention of it in 1837. However, the luxury edition published in 1878 had an addendum that included the poinsettia. It used to be the plant most identified with Christmas here, before being supplanted by the American Christmas tree. We still consider it our Christmas flower.



There are two other items worth noting that its inspiration came from Mexico: the panunuluyan and the parol. The parol was, of course, inspired by the Mexican piñata and the luminaria. The Mexican luminaria is a clay pot with a star shaped cut-out; when a candle is lit inside the pot, the star glows. This was placed outside every home as a sign that the Holy Couple who were in search of an inn were welcome. Of course, that journey is commemorated in what is called the posadas in Mexico; the panunuluyan here.

During the era of the galleon trade, customs and culture was exchanged between Mexico (who in turn received them from Spain) and the Philippines. Spain is the mother country, Mexico our elder brother.

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