

Filipino Holiday Celebrations

We are in the midst of the 2013 holiday season, having just finished Thanksgiving and Hanukkah, now anticipating Christmas. Filipinos love holidays. There's Christmas, New Year's Eve, Easter and feasts of their town's patron saint. Throw in All Saints Day for good measure. Yes, we celebrate the dead too. Although sometimes accompanied by bloody collateral damage, Philippine elections tend to resemble holidays. Free spending elective office seekers become the secular patron saints, doling out favors. Filipinos like to blame our former colonizers for some of our outlandish habits. A history of 300 years in the convent and 50 years of Hollywood, according to one American writer. Sorry, but that reasoning doesn't cut it. We've turned some religious occasions into a tropical Bacchanalia.

The Filipino way of Christmas starts early. Decorations go up in October. By November, Christmas songs permeate the airwaves. Some Filipinos even brag that the country has the longest Christmas season. Growing up during the fifties, we heard "I'm Dreaming of a White Christmas" constantly. Of course most Filipinos don't know much about winter or snow. I doubt that many know the identity of the songwriter, Irving Berlin, or that he also wrote a song titled "Heaven Watch the Philippines." Most of the songs were imports, you would rarely hear a Filipino Christmas song. Today families also try to outdo each other with outdoor lights.

During the Spanish era, the friars started celebrating *Misa de Gallo* or Mass of the Rooster, to herald the coming of Christmas. The first *Misa de Gallo* is on Dec. 16 and continues for 9 days, making it a Novena. The rooster referred to the fact that the Mass was celebrated before dawn. Thus the farmers could attend Mass then return to tend their farms without losing a lot of daylight. Filipino-Americans have now spread this tradition in the U.S. Filipinos long ago ceased calling it *Misa de Gallo*, now referring to it as *Simbang Gabi*, or Evening Mass. Instead of the dawn Mass, the celebration is done in the evening. In fact we are going to a *Simbang Gabi* at our parish this weekend. In areas with a large Filipino population, *Simbang Gabi* has been growing in popularity and becoming established.

There are traditions I remember warmly. Houses were decorated with *parols*, a star shaped lantern evoking the Star of Bethlehem. At one time, most people made their own, using bamboo strips and thin, almost translucent colored paper. A light bulb would be placed inside the center. Val tried her hand at making a *parol*, although it turned out much larger than intended. They have evolved into sometimes garish displays, resembling neon signs. Most *parols* are now made of *capiz* shells and a whole industry has grown around it. We brought a *capiz parol* back from one of our trips, which Val puts up every year. It is hanging off the living room right now. If you'd like to see one, Google *parol* and click on images. They will blow you away.

The tradition of midnight Mass is alive and well in the Philippines. This is followed by a feast we call *Noche Buena*, literally a good night. It is not a greeting, but refers to Christmas eve. The centerpiece of the family spread would be a Chinese ham. A layer of fat would still be on the ham, which after baking would be sprinkled with brown sugar. A hot iron is used to sear the sugar on the fat. You will not eat a better ham, salty, sweet and fatty. I'm salivating.

Filipino Holiday Celebrations

Six days after Christmas, Filipinos celebrate New Year's eve with a bang, literally. Starting about 10:00 pm, it sounds like a combat zone in towns and cities across the archipelago. Firecrackers of all sizes explode like machine gun bullets. They range in size from smaller than a AAA battery, to a thick one inch triangle (*triangulos*) to the size of a small garlic bulb. The latter is aptly called *bawang*, Tagalog for garlic. They are powerful. If you place a paint can over it, the explosion would almost tear the bottom off. I loved blowing up tin cans. The crescendo is reached at midnight, when you would need earplugs to protect your hearing. Years after I left Manila, a diabolical firecracker was introduced. Called Judas belt, the *triangulos* were strung into a long belt, like a bandoleer, several feet long. People would lay them out on the street to ignite several simultaneously. I wanted Val to observe New Year's eve in Manila, so we went one year. Once is enough for her. After midnight, the air was so thick with acrid smoke that my brother got lost while trying to drive home. On New Year's eve in the Philippines, a lot of money goes up in smoke.

Everyone associated with law enforcement, fire departments, hospitals and health agencies campaign year after year to discourage this behavior. Gruesome pictures of celebrants, with blown off fingers and mangled hands, are shown in the media. Body counts of fatalities from firearms discharges are published. All to no avail. The celebration goes on. Sometimes a firecracker factory would blow up, but another one quickly takes its place.

I just finished reading Bill O'Reilly's "Killing Jesus." This brings another Filipino tradition to mind, re-enacting the crucifixion on Good Friday. To my knowledge, no other Catholic country has continued this practice. Discouraged by the Catholic Bishops, unsanctioned by their parishes, the ritual continues. It has even become a tourist attraction. Devotees call it *panata*, a promise to undergo Christ's passion. The penitents are whipped bloody, wear a crown of thorns and get nailed to a cross. In a concession to hygiene, stainless steel nails are used. In earlier days, the penitents would cover their faces to remain anonymous, but today they are in full view on YouTube. Women too, have expressed their *panata*, joining the spectacle. I wonder how long this tradition will last. It can't end soon enough.

Every town, every district in larger cities, has a patron saint. I grew up in the district of San Miguel or St. Michael the Archangel. The whole town is decorated with bunting. Preceding the town fiesta (Filipinos sometimes call it *pista sa nayon*), there is a beauty contest. We just love beauty contests! The town comes alive. Vendors from out of town flock to the main square. There are stage plays and carnival sideshows. Everyone puts out a feast, whether they could afford to or not. This time, the centerpiece is the *lechon de leche*, a roast sucking pig. There would be a lot of inebriated men walking around. Some towns have developed very colorful fiestas, each one worth a visit. We'll have to do another essay, to cover all this.

Mario E. Orosa
Dec. 12, 2013