

Filipino, as Filipinos speak it.



Newbs: Christmas Episode! Ano Plano Natin?

Nay, ano plano natin sa Pasko? – Mom, what are we doing for Christmas?
Simbang gabi tapos noche Buena. – Midnight mass, then Christmas dinner.

Kailan tayo magbubukas ng regalo? – When will we open gifts?

Pagkatapos ng noche Buena. - After Christmas dinner.

Extra extra:

Maligayang Pasko! – Merry Christmas!

Manigong Bagong Taon! – Happy New Year!

A look at Filipino Christmas Customs and Traditions

By Mickey Ingles

You know when it's Christmas time in the Philippines. It's pretty obvious. You have parols of every conceivable Christmas color hanging from the windows of every home. The tempting aroma of *puto bumbong* and *bibingka* fill the air, a delight which greets the early birds who wake up for *simbang gabi*. Carols, both traditional and modern, take the place of rap and pop songs on the radio. Kids go door-to-door with their makeshift maracas and guitars, singing "*Pasko, pasko, pasko na naman*" for a few pesos and the occasional candy. Malls are transformed into winter wonderlands, complete with mechanical polar bears, hanging Christmas trees, and of course, Christmas shoppers – millions of them. You have the nice kids walking around with a dreamy look in their eyes – probably thinking of what goodies they'll get from Santa; while you have the naughty kids walking around with a look of worry and calculation in their faces – probably thinking of a way to redeem themselves from a year of being naughty. A cozy feeling of family gives even those with the hardest of hearts a feeling of warmth despite the cooling weather. And of course, you have nativity scenes popping up everywhere – from the high-rises of Makati, to the shanties of Tondo, to the fishing villages of Laguna – showing that Filipinos have not forgotten the *Christ* in Christmas.

Christmas season in the Philippines is unmatched throughout the world. Christmas here is said to be the longest in the world – starting from the early weeks of November, lasting all the way until the Feast of the Epiphany in January. The season is strewn with rituals and traditions. But what do these traditions really mean? Where did they come from?

Kick back, relax, grab a plate of *bibingka* and a cup of *tsokolate* as we take a trip back in time to see the history and meaning behind our favorite Filipino Christmas traditions.

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The Parol

Take a walk anywhere in the country during Christmas and you'll see houses and roads strewn with colorful star lanterns. Another Spanish influence (from the Spanish word for lantern – *farol*), these star lanterns represent the Star of Bethlehem – that shining star which led the Magi to the most famous manger in the world.

These *parols* range from the simple to the extravagant. Simple *parols* are usually made out of bamboo sticks and crepe paper. Candles or lamps are often placed inside the lantern, making the simple star both illuminating and um, a bit of a fire hazard. The more extravagant *parols* can be seen lining up the streets of Metro Manila. Instead of the usual 5-pointed star, these *parols* come in the form of 16-pointed or even 20-pointed stars, with dancing lights instead of a candle to light it. But no matter if the *parol* is a simple *papel de hapon* lantern hanging from a fisherman's window or a capiz shell lantern strung atop a rich man's satellite dish, the *parol* brings out the same feelings in all Filipinos – that the birth of Christ is here and it's time to celebrate.

Misa de Gallo or Simbang Gabi

Misa de gallo, which literally means “Rooster's Mass” in Spanish, is one of the most important and loved Filipino Christmas traditions. Also known as “Midnight Mass”, this novena of masses has its roots in the country's Spanish colonial history. The tradition began when priests would visit farmers (who couldn't leave their rice fields to go to church) in the wee hours of the morning to say mass.

While in other Spanish speaking countries, *misa de gallo* is heard on Christmas Eve; in the Philippines, it's actually a string of nine masses starting from December 16 to Christmas Eve. The masses usually start just before the rooster crows, usually around 4 am or 5 am, hence the name *simbang gabi*. (However, there have been *anticipated simbang gabi* masses which start around 9 pm the night before that have popped up in recent years)

Filipinos leave the cozy comforts of their beds not only to hear mass but also to enjoy the yummy Christmas treats that come with *simbang gabi*. These include *bibingka* (flour and egg cakes), *puto bumbong* (purple rice cakes with coconut shavings) and *tsokolate* (the creamy Filipino version of hot chocolate). If the food and the spiritual fulfillment are not enough, some Filipinos believe that if one completes the 9-day novena, they'll be granted a special wish.

Panunuluyan

Head to a small town or a school and you might see another popular Christmas tradition – the *panunuluyan*. Usually held on Christmas Eve, this tradition reenacts that fateful night of 2000 years ago – when Mary and Joseph search the Bethlehem streets looking for a place to lodge. Townsfolk and students dress up as shepherds and innkeepers, (and sometimes even donkeys) and head to the streets to recreate the night before Jesus was born. Some reenactments also feature the *wika wika bang bang*, a traditional folk song to ask for lodging. Complete with the drama of seeing Joseph and Mary rejected countless times by innkeepers and the jubilation of Jesus' birth, this tradition dates back to the Spanish colonial period as well.

Noche Buena

Translated to “a good night” in Spanish, the Noche Buena is the feast to end all feasts in the Philippines. This family celebration is usually held after the last mass of *simbang gabi* on Christmas Eve, but it's ultimately up to the families when and how they want to celebrate.

Noche Buena is basically a smorgasbord of Filipino food – with *lechon* (roasted pig), *queso de bola* and *hamon* (Christmas ham) taking the center stage. Filipinos have been known to gain up to five pounds in the span of a couple of days because of the feasts which come with Christmas.

As a rule, *Noche Buena* is also a huge and oftentimes crazy family reunion. Relatives all meet up in the house of *lolo* and *lola* to enjoy a night of caroling, story-telling and gift-giving. Some families even

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have talent shows – with the youngest kids performing dances and songs (which they’ll regret in the future. I don’t think I’ll ever forget singing *Doe a Dear* in one of our *Noche Buenas*).

It also showcases the old Filipino tradition of *pagmamano*, a custom of giving respect to grandparents and older folks. Kids line up and touch their forehead to *lolo* and *lola*’s hand, saying “*mano po*.” It’s a touching custom which has stood the test of time. Grandparents look forward to it because of the nostalgia it brings, while kids look forward to it because of the promise of *aguinaldo* – money in the form of crisp bills given by the grandparents after *pagmamano*.

Belen

The *belen* is another Filipino tradition which borrows its roots both from the Spanish and the Americans. It’s a tableau depicting the Nativity Scene, with the Holy Family surrounded by shepherds, angels, farm animals and the Magi. It has been a favorite among children who never thought that Baby Jesus could be immortalized as an action figure.

Belens are as ubiquitous as the *parol* during Christmas. Traditionally, *belens* were placed in the living rooms of homes and churches. Recently they can be seen almost everywhere, from offices to shopping malls. In fact, *belens* have been getting extravagant every year. Head over to the Greenhills Shopping Center in San Juan and you’ll find yourself looking at life-size representation of the Nativity Scene. The clincher here is that these statutes actually *move* to a light and sound presentation, and oddly enough, Santa Claus has made been known to make a cameo in the Nativity scene – to the cheers of children and the bewilderment of *lolos* and *lolas*.

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Whether these traditions have been handed down by the Spanish or the Americans, the rich culture of the Philippines has infused these customs and rituals with our own sense of identity. As one can notice, Filipino Christmas traditions are rooted in two things which strike at the core of the Filipino identity – a shared faith and a sense of family. *Simbang gabis* and the *panunuluyan* are a sign of an unwavering devotion to the real reason behind Christmas. And no one can debate that Christmas here in the Philippines is all about spending time with one’s family.

A moment of reflection will make one realize that this is what sets the Filipino Christmas apart from the rest of the world. The Filipino Christmas, with its rich history of tradition rooted in its identity, brings back the real meaning of Christmas every year. Despite the economic woes and the political instability that threaten the way we live every year, a simple *simbang gabi* and a dinner with the family brings back the true spirit of Christmas – a time spent remembering Christ with the people we love the most.