

# How Filipinos Reinvented Christmas

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**The biggest event that the more than 11-million Overseas Filipinos (total, as updated on Dec. 7, 2010) miss most is Christmas celebrated the Filipino way. For the Philippines, 85% Christian in population, celebrates Christmas (Advent) as more-than a religious season longer than any country in the world. Europeans and many Anglo-Saxon Americans celebrate usually Christmas in 12 days (December 25th to January 6th), as popularized by the carol "The Twelve Days of Christmas." The Spanish missionaries in the Philippines added in the 16th century a nine-day novena and morning mass from December 16th to December 24th, thereby making the Christmas season in the Philippines a festivity of 21 days. While Americans start to prepare for Christmas the day after Thanksgiving on the last Thursday of November, the American-style Christmas season is more of a commercial undertaking or business venture in reality. The American Christmas pales in comparison with Hispanic-based Filipino Christmas, which the people of the Philippines actually "reinvented" by adding a lot of religious traditions and cultural customs.**

*Editor's Notes: The author is a charter member of the Philippine History Group of Los Angeles, California. While many of the historical tidbits in this report are admittedly based on anecdotal sources, the author has tried to be as authoritative as much as possible. Some of the historical tidbits are based on encyclopedia data. The author thanks his colleagues in the PHGLA and his history professors in San Beda College in the City of Manila and the Divine Word High School in Sorsogon City, Philippines, for sharing some of the historical tidbits that are incorporated in this essay.*

The Spanish missionaries introduced Christmas as part of the Catholic ritual a short time after 1565 when the Spaniards returned to colonize formally the Philippines. This was 44 years after the great explorer, Fernando de Magallanes, tried to introduce Christianity in the Philippines in 1521. Magallanes failed to colonize the archipelago that was to become the Philippines when he was killed in battle on the Island of Cebu in April 1521. The Augustinian religious order sent priests with the 1564 expedition as commanded by Miguel Lopez de Legazpi, who named the archipelago after King Philip II (1527-1598). In 1577 the Franciscan missionaries arrived in the Philippines to continue the Christianization of the Philippine Islands. The Jesuits arrived in the Philippines in 1581. The Dominicans came to the Philippines in 1587, with a Dominican bishop coming, however, with the Jesuits in 1581.

Some Filipino historians (self-proclaimed most probably as they appear to be) are insisting that that the first Christmas in the Philippines was celebrated 200 years before Magellan discovered the country in 1521. These alleged historians claim that Christmas was introduced in the Philippines probably between 1200 AD and 1320 AD. They say that on the way back to Italy from the Orient, an Italian priest by the name of Fray Odoric celebrated mass (on December 25th) on the shores of what is now the Province of Pangasinan. The natives in Pangasinan became friendly when they realized he and his compatriots meant no harm. A Christmas tree was allegedly planted beside a black cross that had been erected on the ground. Father Odoric then proceeded allegedly to start the first Christmas mass. These historical buffs do not provide, however, primary or even secondary sources that would confirm even the existence of this Fray Odoric. This historical claim may be similar to the allegations of some of them that the Philippine island of Samar was named after the Biblical region of Samaria, where Jesus Christ used to preach. And that the apostle Thomas visited Samar Island after his missionary work was done in the western coast of India. Perhaps they would claim also that one of the lost tribes of Israel settled in Samar.

**The Christmas Novena** The tradition of the 9-day novena and morning mass probably started during the reign of Pope Sixtus V (1521-1590), who was pope from April 24, 1585, to Aug. 27, 1590. It was Pope Sixtus V who reorganized the papal curia, a system that still prevails today in the 21st century. He decreed that all bishops make annual pilgrimages to Rome. The first bishop assigned to the Philippines was a Dominican monk called Fray Salazar in 1581 and he probably started to make his pilgrimages to Rome starting in 1586.

According to anecdotal sources, this 9-day religious rite was started by the Spanish friars in the Philippines to enable the farmers to attend it, as the mass was called "Misa de Gallo (Mass of the Rooster)." The Tagalog-speaking Filipinos called this the "Simbang Gabi," for "gabi" meant night. This was a misnomer of course as the mass started at 4:00 a.m., a tradition that continues to this day in the Philippines. Those attending the mass would often take breakfast after the mass at the churchyard or parish hall. The breakfast consisted usually of hot chocolate (cocoa) or coffee or salabat (ginger-based drink) and Filipino rice cakes or puddings.

This 9-day tradition was most probably started by the Philippines-based Spanish friars to ask special blessings for the Spanish king, Philip II, who was the monarch from 1556-1598. This was probably at the time Spain was engaged in war, starting in 1588, with Protestant England. The celebrated battle of the Spanish Armada happened in 1588 and the war with England lasted up to 1604, six years after the death of Philip II. The 9-day Christmas-time novena and mass could have been also a way for the Spanish clergy assigned in the Philippines to honor Pope Sixtus V. The pope was born on Dec. 13, 1521, in the same year that Fernando de Magallanes "discovered for the Spanish empire" the Philippine archipelago. The pope's original name was Felice Peretti and perhaps the Spanish friars in the Philippines at that time greeted each other on Christmas Day "Felice (oops, Feliz) Navidad." And much later, the Spanish authorities offered the surname "Perete" as one of the optional names when the Filipino natives were asked to adopt Spanish surnames. Perhaps the Perete clan of the Province of Sorsogon (in the Philippine Region of Bicolandia) decided to adopt its family name in honor of Pope Sixtus V. Historians note that Pope Sixtus V was a highly-popular pontiff in the Philippines at his time because he was a former procurator-general of the Franciscans and a personal friend of the Jesuit icon, Ignatius of Loyola. The other reason of course for Pope Sixtus V's popularity was that he was known for his intelligence, vigor

and a proactive concern for the poor.

**The British Contribution** In the 18th century Spain and England again were at war with each other. This led to the British occupation of Manila from 1762-1764. Historians have not written much about the British influence insofar as the introduction of English as an alternate official language of the Philippines or of English Christmas traditions in the Philippines. But it is logical to assume that the British occupation forces could have enriched the Filipino celebration of Christmas. Perhaps the British soldiers could have taught English Christmas songs to the Filipino population in Manila and the surrounding towns. Perhaps the British could have taught the Filipinos the 16th-century English Christmas ditty, "The Twelve Days of Christmas" and other Christmas songs.

*The Christian world someday will adopt many of the traditions found in the 21-day Filipino Christmas celebration. When this happens, it is actually a gift from the Iberians, the Spanish friars and Pope Sixtus V, the British, the Germans, the Americans and other peoples that contributed to the making of the Filipino heritage. The Filipinos are simply giving back to the world what the universe has given them. – Bobby M. Reyes*

**No** matter how and when in the 16th century the 9-day "Misa de Gallo" started, it became part of the Filipino Christmas heritage. The Spanish friars, who literally paved the way - with the Cross - the conquest of the Philippines, introduced also the display of the Belen (the Nativity scene) in churches and then in Filipino homes, starting at the residences of the so-called Filipino Ilustrados (elite). Christmas carols consisted of religious songs during the Spanish regime. In many provinces, especially those in the Bicol Region, children danced a religion-oriented "Pastora a Belen," which was adopted from a Hispanic dance ritual that celebrated the birth of Jesus Christ. The Spanish colonizers introduced also the "Misa de Aguinaldo," a mass in the evening of December 24th. A festive meal called the "Noche Buena" followed the midnight mass. Filipino families serve not only their native food favorites but also selected recipes and food selections from Spain, China and England. The Filipinos copied recipes from India (like chicken curry of the Indian soldiers the British brought with them in 1762), Thailand (as done in the Bicol Region for more than two thousand years) or Vietnam and later in the 20th century, recipes from the United States. The poorer Filipinos could only serve a few modest food selections but Filipinos families have been known to save and even borrow money to prepare for this annual ritual called the "Noche Buena." The Filipino people started also to emulate the gift-giving practice of their Spanish masters. In fact to date Christmas gifts in the Philippines are still called "aguinaldos." And godchildren normally visit during Christmas the homes of their godparents not only to partake of food but also to receive their "aguinaldos." But when these godchildren are already mature and earning, the roles are reversed on Christmas time: The adult godchildren visit the godparents to bring the latter gifts.

Many Overseas Filipino families and workers remit money to their kin in the Philippines on Christmas time. They send also shipments (in the so-called Balikbayan boxes) of food, clothing and gifts that usually arrive before Christmas Day. The Overseas Filipinos

are not only keeping the home country afloat by their currency remittances and shipments of food parcels but they are also helping keep alive the traditions of the Filipino Christmas. Many Filipino Americans say with humor that they are like the Three Kings who offered the gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh to the Baby Jesus. For they send to their kin in the Philippines dollars (gold), frankfurters and corned beef and myrrhiment, oops, merriment in form of party platters, roasted pig and even Filipino beer and rum. Some Philippine-based marketing companies have branches abroad that now specialize in selling these party platters to Overseas Filipinos with the delivery done on time for the "Noche Buena."

**Thanksgiving in December** Even many non-Christian Filipino families celebrate Christmas as another Thanksgiving Day. Yes, the Filipinos celebrated a European-style Thanksgiving nearly a century before the Americans did. Families with babies often have the infants' baptism done during the Christmas season. Filipino families hold reunions. On the average many Filipinos and Overseas Filipinos attend five Christmas parties and reunions: At ones' own home, at the residence of in-laws, at the office or place of work, at the club house of the civic association that many Filipinos belong to and at the church where they worship.

For many Filipinos Christmas is also a time to remember their dead kin and close friends. Many visit the graveyards of their departed loved ones during the Christmas holidays.

**Reinventing Christmas even in America** Now many Overseas Filipino communities stage also their versions of the 9-day novena and mass. In Southern California, where some Catholic parishes have Filipino-American majorities, Filipino Americans started in the mid-1980s the celebration of the "Simbang Gabi." These Filipino-American Catholics take turns in hosting at their respective parishes a day for the novena and mass, which event is usually held in the evening after work. A reception usually follows the mass and novena at the parish social hall. Some parishes also celebrate a special Filipino mass during the Christmas eve or Christmas day. At the St. John the Baptist Parish in Baldwin Park, California, the congregation celebrates a Filipino mass at 1:00 p.m. every Christmas day, with a Filipino priest usually officiating the rite and sacraments. A Filipino-American choir sings Christmas songs during the mass, including some favorite Filipino (Tagalog) Christmas carols.

Many Filipino families also display huge lighted Christmas lanterns, called the parol, during the 21-day Nativity festivity. Originally the parol's bamboo skeletal frames were wrapped in colored papers called "papel de Japon," which were probably first imported from Japan. Now the parol is wrapped in colored plastic sheets and contain inside it multicolored electric bulbs. Some of the more-expensive parols are made of kapiz (made from a variety of sea shells). Some parts of the country now celebrate a Parol Festival during Christmas where lantern designers try to outdo each other in design and size. The electric Christmas lights are becoming popular features aside from the parols of well-to-do Filipino homes in urban centers. On the other hand the parol continues to be a more popular ornament, especially in the rural areas not yet serviced by electric cooperatives. In the areas that lack electric service, candles lit up the parol.

Filipinos are known for their savvy wit and humor. Somehow they turned December 28th, which is Holy Innocents' Day as per the Biblical account of how King Herod ordered the slaughter of all male babies, into a Nativity equivalent of the April Fool's Day. Now, the "Niños Inocentes' Day" in the Philippines has become a day for

pranksters, humorists and lampoonists (sic). Yes, the Philippines is perhaps the only country in the world that celebrates the April Fool's Day in April and in December. And who knows, the myth and historical hoax that is story of Fray Odoric is a Niños Inocentes prank?

**Christmas, Hollywood Style, Comes In** The Americans took over the Philippine Islands on May 1, 1898, at the height of the Spanish-American War. Then after the end of the Christian Filipino-American War from 1899-1902, the United States started to mold the Philippines after its own image. The Americans introduced of course their way of celebrating Christmas. The new colonial masters also sought the replacement of Spanish Jesuit priests with American Jesuits, who favored more the American-style Advent Season. The Americans introduced for instance not only the Christmas tree and all the trimmings that go with it but also the sending of Christmas cards. For what would the American Christmas be without Hollywood and Hallmark's? The American colonial masters of course elevated to an art among the Filipinos the exchanges of Christmas gifts among fellow workers and kin.

**The German Contribution** But speaking of trees, it was not, however, the first time that some Filipinos saw Christmas trees, as displayed by the Americans. Several German immigrants and diplomats introduced Christmas trees in the Philippines in the 19th century. Likewise, several scions of the Filipino Ilustrado families spent time in Germany near the end of the same century. The Filipino foremost national hero, Jose P. Rizal Mercado, lived for some time in Germany and developed close ties with some Austrian-German friends. Rizal incidentally said that Christmas had become a Filipino holiday for children. Rizal and his colleagues could have been some of the better-known practitioners of the Niños Inocentes' Day, an opportunity they used to get back at, or even humiliate, their Spanish colonizers.

*Christmas has become a Filipino holiday for children. -- Jose P. Rizal*

And after Jose P. Rizal met his martyrdom on Dec. 30, 1896, many Filipinos began celebrating the New Year with a 3-day festivity as part of their Christmas holidays. The Philippine labor movement was organized in 1901 by Isabelo (Don Belong) de los Reyes and his supporters also on December 30th. When the Philippines finally obtained, nay, reacquired independence from the United States on July 4, 1946, Rizal Day on December 30th became an official public holiday and with New Year's Day being also a public holiday, December 31st became a sandwiched holiday. Almost all Filipino offices, whether public or private, close at noon on December 29th, thereby making the New Year's holiday a three-and-a-half-day long weekend.

**Heterogeneous Filipino Christmas** Christmas is now part of the way of life among Filipinos. The Nativity in the Philippines has become a hybrid world-class celebration. Heterogeneous in origin because it is a rite of religion as introduced by the Iberian friars, a season for English songs and German-style Christmas trees, a virtual smorgasbord of international foods and a time for pomp and pageantry, Hollywood style, as brought by the Americans. And over the years, Christmas carols from "Feliz Navidad" to "The Twelve Days of Christmas" to "Santa Claus Is Coming to Town" were added to the Filipino repertoire of Christmas songs, some of which were composed by

Filipinos, using as lyrics words from the Tagalog and other Filipino languages. Indeed the Filipino Christmas is unique in the Christian world.

Despite its nearly 435 years of history, it is still evolving as now many Overseas Filipinos are slowly introducing Nativity festival features that they are picking up in the more than 120 countries where they have immigrated to or where they are based as contract workers. On the other hand Filipino overseas workers, who are said to have become the modern-day versions of the Wandering Jew, are introducing the Filipino Christmas to their new places of domicile. There have been reports of Filipino housemaids introducing features of the Filipino Christmas in the multiethnic household that they are serving.

Perhaps indeed the Christian world someday will adopt many of the traditions found in the 21-day Filipino Christmas celebration. When this happens, it is actually a gift from the Iberians, the Spanish friars and Pope Sixtus V, the British, the Germans, the Americans and other peoples that contributed to the making of the Filipino heritage. The Filipinos are simply giving back to the world what the universe has given them. For after all, Filipinos, who are said to be the first true "children of the universe" and citizens of the world, say that at Christmas time it is always better to give than to receive. # # #

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