

Christmas (Pasko) Approaches in the Philippines; But First, Undas!

The Day of the Dead Celebrated November 1 in Typical Pinoy Style

BY ROGER STRUKHOFF

NOVEMBER 1, 2009 03:10 AM EST



Christmas lights have been up in the Philippines since early October. Commercials for Pasko, as the holiday is called, have appeared on TV, and the malls are full of people getting a head start on their shopping.

There's a particular form of lighted star (known as a parol) that's ubiquitous, in many variations, and for sale at innumerable roadside stands along the major roads here in Pampanga. The large Christmas trees found in most American homes are a luxury here, and not as critical to the tradition as the parols and the creches (called belens) and, as always with the Philippines, the family.

Pasko is also centered around the Catholic Church, a series of Masses and feasts in the days leading to Christmas Day; the celebration continues through the Epiphany (you know, The Three Magi) in early January. Verily, the Twelve Days of Christmas (and more) are celebrated here.

So with this early focus on Christmas, I was surprised when I learned of the importance of November 1, the Day of the Dead. Every American knows about how this day is celebrated in Mexico, replete colorful, macabre masks. Less known is the importance of this holiday in the Philippines.

Indeed, November 1--known as Undas (so named because it's celebrated on the first of the month), Fiesta ng mga Patay (Festival of the Dead), and other regional variants--rates as the third most important holiday after Christmas and Holy Week here.

But here in the Philippines, the holiday is festive, as its name implies. Family members return in droves to their provincial villages, song-filled treks are made to the cemeteries to remember and converse with the dead, and flower sales reach annual peaks. Even in the relatively expensive Metro Manila area, a dozen Irises or Mums can be purchased for less than \$5.

Philippine Catholicism has teased out most of the overwrought weightiness characteristic of the Spanish forebears who brought it to this land--the notorious real-life Good Friday crucifixions here in Pampanga are an obvious exception that is not universally popular.

The Patay Fiesta, though, is a good-enough demonstration of the relentlessly sunny Filipino outlook on life. Beloved grandparents come alive in imaginations once more, vast amounts of baboy (pork) are consumed, and sales of Red Horse (or San Mig in the more "social" income brackets) spike up. Even if family members are displaced from the provinces to the big city, as so many are, there will always be copious numbers of cousins, aunts, and friends to appear, seemingly out the woodwork, as the afternoon deepens and the festivities start.

There were some concerns about the approaching of an Undas-day typhoon (known as Santi locally, Mirimae internationally). It blew through instead early on Halloween Day, caused some death and destruction near its impact point in central Luzon, then rushed through the island (and Manila) with less damage than that caused by Ondoy and Pepeng a few weeks earlier. November 1, a Sunday, dawned sunny and surprisingly cool for this part of the world, although the sun quickly assumed its normal ferocity by 8am.

Attendance at Catholic Mass in the morning brought an exuberant reading of the Beatitudes by the parish priest, a call for people to respect family more than those in power (a surprisingly frank utterance that brought enthusiastic applause), and an exhortation to "love the living" in addition to "remembering the dead" on this important holiday.

No worries, Padre, you'll never have to tell Filipinos to remember to love their families, particularly on a day with the word "Fiesta" in it.

Let the music, dancing, and feasting begin!

Ref.: <http://soa.sys-con.com/node/1167152>