

A description of the Filipino Christmas star-shaped lantern, its significance and meaning for Filipinos.

The appearance of bright, star-shaped lanterns along the roads in the Philippines signals the start of the Christmas Season in this country. Filipinos celebrate the Christmas Season probably way before people in other countries do. Usually, these star-shaped lanterns called "parol" will show up as early as September, along with the many other symbols of the Philippine holidays. For the Filipino, the presence of the syllable "ber" after the main numerical root word of a month (Septem-, for example) indicates the start of Christmas. Many Filipinos also humorously associate the syllable "ber" with "brrr," the sound one makes when the cold month of December approaches. The "parol" is thus a symbol of anticipation, for indeed, Christmas is the most wonderful time of the year for Filipinos, as it may be for people in other countries.

Parols come in many different shapes and sizes, although, as earlier mentioned, the star-shaped pattern remains the most commonly used design. More recent designs include that of angels, christmas trees, happy faces, Santa Claus' face, and even commercial products like Coke or beer cans. The basic concept is the same for these lanterns. There is a source of light, usually with blinkers, within a design wrought out of a casing made of bamboo sticks. The sides of the lantern are translucent, owing to the materials often used to make them, such as Japanese paper or colored plastic. Meticulously made lanterns employ layers of these materials, as well as a variety of stickers, creating illusions of depth and contrast even though there is only one source of light, which comes from within the lantern itself. Many lanterns even employ a moving mechanism, thereby exposing its many sides to observers passing by. Most Filipinos simply hang their parols on their doors and windows, keeping the streets of the Philippines aglow with colorful designs for over 3 months.

The contest parols used in yearly competitions at the Paskuhan Village in Pampanga, Philippines, are actually giant lanterns studded with bulbs all over. Each bulb is painstakingly arranged in such a way that its wire will touch a huge rotating wheel behind the lantern's face only at a particular timing. The timing is dictated by the location of "catch wires" which connect with the individual bulbs' wires to light them up in time with a musical piece, usually a popular dance tune. Because the lanterns are gigantic, they have to be mounted on huge trucks, with their "timing wheels" loaded on to the truck as well, along with the power source, usually arrays of batteries when outlets are not available. The lanterns are judged according to the synchronicity of their bulbs lighting with the music being played, as well as for the artistry that went into making them. The event is an annual crowd-drawer in the Philippines, and understandably costs millions to come up with.

The parol is a showcase of some of the Filipino's distinctive qualities of ingenuity, hospitality and passion for hope and peace. Ingenuity, because the materials used for parol are varied. Some parols are made of indigenous materials such as bamboo, or a pliable wood called rattan. Sometimes, especially during hard-pressed occasions, parols are made from garbage materials like plastic containers and newspapers. Sometimes, small shells are used in intricate designs to build up whole parols up to 5 feet in diameter. The parol is a symbol for hospitality because the people who hang parols in their houses often intend to have visitors during the Christmas Season, whom they treat with much care and attention. Finally, the parol is a symbol of the Filipino's longing for hope and peace, because the people who remember Christmas in any way such as decorating their houses also remember the meaning behind the commercial overtures and gift-giving so peculiar to this season.

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