

The History of Parol Christmas Lanterns



Cultural Origins

In the Filipino language, a Christmas lantern is called a *parol*. There's no greater symbol of the Filipino Christmas spirit than the parol. All through the Christmas season, star-shaped lanterns can be found hanging outside homes and along the streets of cities and small provincial towns, farms and fishing villages. For Filipinos, making a parol, decorating one and lighting a parol is an expression of shared faith and hope.

The earliest parols were traditionally made from simple materials like bamboo sticks, Japanese rice paper, crepe paper, and a candle or coconut oil-lamp for illumination; although the present day parol can take many different shapes and forms. Around Manila, parols made of Capiz shell or plastic illuminate the city. One of the most spectacular innovations can be found in the city of San Fernando where 20 foot tall parols with kaleidoscopic blinking lights are paraded through the streets on truck beds. Whatever the material or shape, the parol is a recognizable symbol to all Filipinos and represents the star of Bethlehem that guided the Three Wise Men to the manger of the newly-born Jesus Christ.



The word parol (pronounced "pah-roll" with a rolling "r") comes from the Spanish word for lantern, farol. According to World Book's Christmas in the Philippines, the roots of the parol can be found in the Mexican piñata. The piñata came to Spain from Italy in the 1300's, spread to Mexico and finally came to the Philippines when the Spaniards brought Christianity to the islands. The book *A Child's Pasko: Christmas in the Philippines* explains that the parol was originally used to light the way to church to attend the daily Misas de Aguinaldo, or Gift Masses, which begin on the 16th of December, and ends with the Misa de Gallo, or "Mass of the Rooster" at midnight of Christmas eve. The midnight mass is followed by a usually lavish meal at home, which is always anticipated by the kids. The first Misa de Aguinaldo that is held at dawn on December 16th marks the official start of the Christmas season.

To see the peak of the Festival of Lights in the Philippines, one must travel at night from December 16th up to January 6th. There you will see all kinds of parols.

The parol is a main component in the Filipino celebration of Christmas, which has become a Festival of Lights. The festivities cover the months ending with "BER" which are September, October, November and of course December. Christmas music can be heard sporadically in the beginning of September, and one could feel an increasing sense of the coming of Christmas as more and more Christmas songs are played on the radio, and as more homes, businesses, streets and parks become brightly lit with wonderful colors. The malls and department stores are the first ones to decorate, and showcase their mangers and beautiful parols.

A Christian Tradition



The parol was originally intended as one's offering to glorify the Lord. It was an important part of the devotion to faithfully attend the 9-day *Misas de Aguinaldo*, to petition for special favors. After coming home from church, instead of stowing the lantern elsewhere in the house, they would proudly hang it outside the window. At night, they would illuminate their parols with candles or coconut-oil lamps to display their art. The villagers would walk around to appreciate the work of others and see who had the nicest design. When new stylistic variations appeared, such as different kinds of tassels, streamers, or crowns around it, others would innovate their own creation, and make plans to display his "better" parol the following year. This friendly competition was encouraged by the church, and the Spanish priests offered incentives for the people to invest time and money to make their parol "the best" as a devotional offering to Jesus. That is why during the Christmas season, some made it a practice to visit various churches that yearly display these new designs and better craftsmanship.

The Spanish priests of old might have walked around the villages at night to appreciate the candlelit parols by the windows of his parishioners, and appreciated the beautiful symbol of the star that led the three wise men to Baby Jesus. Certainly there must have been friendly reminders to promptly blow the candles out before they go to bed.

During the Spanish times, the pale colors of *papel de Japon* were predominant in the designs.

Matthew 2:9-10

After they had heard the king, they went on their way, and the star they had seen in the east went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw the star, they were overjoyed.

Mateo 2:9-10

Pagkarinig nila sa hari ay tumuloy na sila sa kanilang lakad. Narito, ang bituin na kanilang nakita sa silanganan ay nanguna sa kanila. Nanguna ito sa kanila hanggang sa sumapit at tumigil sa tapat ng kinaroroonan ng maliit na bata. Nang makita nila ang bituin, lubos silang nagalak.

Ref.: <http://www.myparol.com/myparol/abouttheparol.html>