

# Christmas symbols in the philippines



PASKO SYMBOLS AND RITUALS Misa de Gallo The dawn of December 16 is different from any other morning in the Philippines. When the day's first cockcrow is heard, exultation rings throughout the nation as church bell toll loudly to signal the official start of Christmastide. The dawn mass is aptly called Misa de Gallo or Mass of the Rooster. While Christmas has been in the air for weeks, or even months, and people have been busy with Pasko activities— today, Christmas really begins.

The sounds of this morning are unique, memorable and much awaited especially in towns and barrios. In the dawn darkness still enveloping everyone, no one notices that some are still in pajamas or nightclothes due to their excitement. Some of them are groups of children walking while singing their lovely carols. People with lit parols, scurry by, not wanting to be late for mass which is usually begins at four o'clock.

Food carts are wheeled noisily into the churchyard— coals burning, ready to cook the wonderful rice cakes of the season which is commonly called as “bibingka at puto-bumbong”. Every morning for nine consecutive days, this joyful exaltation is part of the Misa de Gallo. The two-centuries-old tradition is commonly called as Simbang Gabi. No country other than the Philippines have this kind of tradition. The practice of dawn masses began sometime in the 1700's when a Spanish friar gathered his flock of farmers, at the time of harvest ( which coincides with Christmas).

He told them that it was a sign of thanksgiving to God will continue to bless them with more bountiful harvest. As of today, there is still a belief that whoever completes the nine-consecutive dawn masses will be granted for

his/her wishes. Today, it is the Misa de Gallo, with its romantic fusion of folk rites and religious enchantment, that makes the coming of Christmas so deeply significant to Filipinos. The Parol The parol is perhaps the paramount Filipino Christmas symbol. The word parol comes from the Spanish word farol which means light. Filipinos having much significance on the symbolism of light, the star being regarded as fount of light, and a sign of hope.

This light such that of a candle first guided the Filipino Catholics to churches at dawn for the Misa de Gallo. It was placed inside a star-shaped paper lantern called parol. The five-pointed star lantern represents the star of Bethlehem which, as the Bible tells, led the Three Kings to the child Jesus lying in a manger. Moreover, the star refers to the Messiah himself. The parol is a native innovation of the Mexican Pinata which originated from 14th century festivals of Renaissance Italy, known for festive decor hanging from windows.

From, Italy the custom spread to Spain, then to Mexico and eventually, to the Philippines. During the yuletide season, parols are seen throughout the country. No Filipino home is without one", goes a local saying. And another, "Rare is the ruralist who cannot make a star lantern".

That shows how important and how significant parols is, on Filiipiino Christmas. Today, the simple parol has evolved into spectacular shapes and kaleidoscopic splendor, but its message of light remains the same to the Filipinos. Panunuluyan The panunuluyan, a Filipinized re-enactment of the plight oh Joseph and Mary seeking a room at an inn in Bethlehem is presented on Christmas Eve just before the midnight mass. It is a tradition

observed with some reservation, though, as its theme of repeated rejections goes against the grain of the Filipino who is known for his tremendous hospitality. This yuletide tradition dates back to St.

Ignatius de Loyola, who first commemorated the journey to Bethlehem in 1580, and to St. John of the Cross, who later presented a version in a pageant. Seven years later, some Spanish missionaries introduced it to Mexico, where it was called posadas (inn). From there, mariners on the Acapulco galleons which landed in Cavite in the late 18th century or the early 19th century incorporated it into local Christmas activities. The tradition still survives mostly in the rural areas where it is called panunuluyan , meaning “ looking for lodging”. There are two variations, the live and the statuary— although some cities have a combination of both.

They stop at three or four homes representing inns, and knock. They are told that the inn is full and there is “ no room for you! ” and are quickly sent away. Those who cannot accept the biblical story of rejection insist on giving the Holy Couple a glass of cool water or juice to drink, while quietly offering wrapped food— the specialty of the house— to take along on their journey. The unsuccessful search for a room ends in a constructed cave with a manger, or at a decorated corner of the church altar.

There, the Nativity scene begins, as the faithful jubilantly sing western and native Christmas carols. Although the tradition has slowly vanished from the metropolitan cities over the past years, it is still staged in school Christmas dramas and is sometimes sponsored by institutions for fund-raising purposes. Misa de Aguinaldo Church bells ring out for the Misa de Aguinaldo

(gift mass) to celebrate the Holy Nativity, the climax of Christmastide in the Philippines. Hallowed in the hearts of Christian Filipinos all over the archipelago are the words of Christmas Gospel. All are singing praises before the glorious belen (creche) with the Child Emmanuel in the manger. Everyone stays awake on the most awaited night of the Noche Buena (midnight repast), in obedience to that ancient custom which proclaimed that all, from the head of the house to the smallest toddler, should not sleep on Christmas Eve.

This is one of the very beautiful tradition, this serves as a reunion, and still usually done by Filipino families. The BelenBelen, from the Spanish word Bethlehem, is the name given to the tableau that represents the glorious Nativity scene. Perhaps the oldest of all Filipino Christmas symbols. The belen or creche originated from Italy where St. Francis of Assisi created the first Nativity scene which included live donkeys and oxen. The tradition was adopted in Spain, traveled to Mexico, and finally came to the Philippines in the 1700's.

During the Hispanic era, belens decorated cathedrals and churches. Life-size figures of the Infant Jesus, the Blessed Mother Mary and St. Joseph were joined by shepherds, peasants, kings and angels, as well as farm animals. But as Christmas is one religious feast much-loved by Filipinos, the belen eventually found its way into the homes of devotees.

Today, the ubiquitous belen, no longer confined on churches or homes, is found everywhere during the Pasko season. It can be found in shopping malls, boutiques, hotel lobbies, restaurants, police stations, parks, sidewalks,

building facades and even taxis, buses and jeepneys. Above all, the belen is an affirmation of the religious fervor and faith of the Filipino people.