

Every convention of Christmas has a distinctly Filipino touch

rice cakes and other delicacies, while waiting for the sunrise.

Sophisticated youths in the cities hold parties that go on till the bells ring for the Cock's Mass, and the night spots in Manila do not close until four a.m., so that the hostesses and their patrons may go to church together.

Every region has its own way of celebrating the Yuletide season, each made more quaint and fascinating by the infusion of local centuries-old traditions, some of which are Muslim, Mexican, European or even pagan in origin.

Filipinos have, by nature, an expansive flair. They are not satisfied with simple affairs. They add many touches of color and drama to the most ordinary traditions. For instance, to Filipinos, carolling is more than just singing songs. In the Bicol region of southern Luzon, in the towns clustered around the majestic Mayon volcano, carollers dress up as *pastores* (shepherds) and they go around to the beat of Muslim gongs, Spanish guitars and pagan drums. They sing Spanish songs called *villancicos*, Filipino folk ditties, *Jingle Bells* and *Santa Claus is Comin' to Town*, as they perform a snake-like ring dance (of Buddhist origin) in the streets and plazas.

In Cebu, carollers smudge their faces with dye to make them look either like carnival clowns or jungle warriors as they sing and perform acrobatic stunts in the streets. In Negros and Panay, in western Visayas, the carollers are called *daigon*. They do not only sing; they, also perform dances, comedy skits, and even funny debates. Their program lasts for hours on end to the enjoyment of everyone, especially the *dai-gons*.

As soon as the *Misa de Gallo* cycle begins, Filipinos start decorating their Christmas trees. No one waits for Christmas Eve to do this, because a lot of things happen on that night. The trees

are of all kinds: pine trees from the mountains of Benguet, dried branches painted white, and different kinds of tropical trees sprayed with artificial snow to make them look "Stateside," and, of course, plastic ones from the United States or Japan.

Beside the tree is the traditional *Belen*. This is a diorama of the Nativity scene, showing the Holy Family, surrounded by the Three Kings, the shepherds and all kinds of animals, including the carabao, or water buffalo, Southeast Asia's beast of burden, which the Child Jesus never saw in His earthly existence. Town plazas and all churches have their *Belen*, or *creche*, which is supposed to have been originated by St. Francis to dramatize his sermons on the Christmas story.

In Catholic churches all over the world, the high point of the religious observance of Christmas is the Midnight Mass. As expected, the Filipinos are not satisfied with just having a Mass. They have added some pageantry to the solemn ritual. It is called *Misa de Aguinaldo* (Mass of the Gifts), in the Philippines.

In some communities not far from Manila, the people, a few hours before the mass, present a reenactment of the first Christmas night when Joseph and Mary went from inn to inn seeking a lodging for the night. This is a Filipino version of the Mexican *posadas*, which was brought to the islands by the Spanish missionaries in the 17th century.

Led by two people, representing Joseph and Mary, the procession leaves the church at about 10 p.m. The participants, dressed up in Biblical costumes, carry lighted candles as they go through the town. They stop at designated houses along the way, and Joseph asks the owner for a room; At each he is summarily turned down. (The dialog is rendered in plaintive song.) By eleven o'clock, they stop at the town square,

where Mary sings a poignant ballad expressing her deep weariness. Joseph soothes her, and so do the crowd. Then the procession wends its way back to the church, where Mary finally takes her last recourse: the manger.

A tableau takes place beside the altar of the church. The Three Kings, shepherds and all the farm animals gather around the manger. And then the Mass begins.

At the stroke of twelve, the bells ring; fireworks lit up the midnight sky; and brass bands play the Philippine national anthem.

The *posadas* tradition, though, is not widespread in the Philippines, because it contradicts the people's innate sense of open-heartedness. Actually, the Filipinos are world-famous for their hospitality, and no stranger, especially on Christmas Eve, is ever turned away from any home.

American servicemen, during the Liberation of the Philippines, remember vividly how Filipinos would virtually force them out of the streets and into their homes to take in the *Noche Buena* (Holy Night) supper, which is served in every Filipino home after the Midnight Mass.

Unlike the Americans who hold their big dinner on the day itself, the real Christmas dinner and family reunion of the Filipinos is in the wee hours of Christmas morning. Actually, with so many activities going on all over town on Christmas Day, Filipino families simply do not have the chance to get together. So, it is during the *Noche Buena* that the whole family sits together at the food-laden table. The lights are turned on all over the house — the lanterns, the Christmas tree lights and the altar candles. The carollers' songs are louder now, and the brass bands keep playing in the town square, where a bonfire glows brightly.

This is the peak of the celebration, and no one tells the children to go to sleep. For in the rural Philippines, there is no Santa Claus who slides down the chimneys — only godfathers. But that is for Christmas Day.

As soon as the children wake up on Christmas morning, they