

Calendar

Dance Like a Bird

A Filipino Christmas

When she was seven or eight years old, Anamaria Labao Cabato had her first glimpse of Filipino dance. It was at a San Diego event in the early 1960s, sponsored by an organization to which her immigrant parents belonged. "And I said, 'Oh my gosh, the Philippines must be the center of the world!'"

That's because she saw so many different cultures in the mix called "Filipino."

"In northern Luzon — Cordillera — which is a mountainous region, the people show traces of Africa," Cabato says of the originators of the rice-farming terraces. "In the south, there are strains of Asia and Malaysia."

LOCAL EVENTS

Filipinos are really Malaysian by race. And seeing those dances, you think of the Balinese, showing their fingers and their nails. Then in the central region are the European influences, because that's where the Spanish settled."

The music is European-influenced, too. "The mandolin is from Italy, and the Filipinos also have that sound," she says. It's made by another stringed-instrument, the *rondalla*.

Some of these folk dances mimic everyday activities transformed into art, as in the northern-style dance, called *banga*. "A *banga* is an earthenware pot used for cooking or carrying," says Cabato, who has studied Filipino dance since she was a teenager. "It would be pretty typical for these women to carry these pots as easily and gracefully as if they were parts of their bodies. So a dance came out of that" — with the dancers using ersatz *bangas*, made of fiberglass.

A fishing dance in the southern style, *pasigin*, employs a net. Cabato describes it as "a playful dance," during which a boy "catches" a girl. "What we use are hula-hoops attached to nets, which are large enough for the girl to pass through."

The dance called *tinikling* originated in central Philippines but is a national dance today. "The dancers imitate the long-legged bird that runs across the rice fields, and when the bamboo rods are clapped together, it's meant to represent the people trying to catch the tinikling birds who eat the rice."

Cabato learned these dances and others after her father, Delfin Labao, helped to found the organization called PASACAT (pronounced pah-SAH-caht) in 1970. Pasacat is actually the name of



PASACAT members display parols, traditional star-lanterns

another dance, but the group uses the letters of the word to form an acronym for the Philippine-American Society and Cultural Arts Troupe.

This weekend, the group's performing-arts company will present a selection of dances as part of a Christmas festival. Women and men will wear "jewel-toned" costumes — "emerald green, royal blue, and the deep purples," says Cabato, who has been executive director of the organization since 1979. *Rondalla* players and percussionists will accompany them.

Children, 12 years old and under, may take part in the *pabitin* ritual. "A *pabitin* is a bamboo rack constructed in crisscross form from which treats are hung. It's strung from a big rope and is moved up and down while the children jump, trying to get the goodies." So in a way, that, too, is a dance, performed by unwitting little dancers.

Everyone may take part in a *parol*-making workshop. *Parols* (roll the "r" and accent the second syllable) are lanterns. Their shape is a five-pointed star, signifying the star of Bethlehem. The frames are bamboo and the sides are *apeel de Japon* or Japanese paper.

Their trimmings are *capiz* shells.

This is a "sentimental activity," Cabato says, as grandparents, recalling their own childhoods, guide their grandchildren in making them.

Traditionally, *parols* are illuminated by candles. Says Cabato, "I remember my mom telling me that, when she was a kid and made them every Christmas, she had to be sure to put the candle in the right place, so the paper wouldn't burn." These days the "flame" inside is more likely to be electric.

Long ago, *parols* weren't merely for decoration; they had a function. "Filipinos have a nine-day novena before Christmas. Called Simbang Gabi, it means 'going to church in the dark.' For those nine days, it used to be that Mass was said before dawn, so farmers could attend before they went to work. And the star lanterns were hung in front of homes to light a path for the farmers to find their way."

Twice in her childhood Cabato was in the Philippines for the days leading up to Christmas. "I remember going to Mass early in the morning during Simbang Gabi and the hustle and bustle of the street vendors selling

the dessert *puto bumbong*, which is cooked inside the bamboo cane."

At the food booths on Saturday, some vendors will sell *puto bumbong*, as well as other ethnic delicacies, like *lumpia*, which resembles an egg roll, and the rice-noodle dish, *pancit*.

There will be carols too, which Cabato considers another example of the cultural amalgam of the Philippines. "A parent of a dancer is singing Filipino Christmas songs. We have a Filipino version of 'Silent Night,' called 'Payapang Daigdig.' It's not the same tune, but there's a definite similarity, because of the somberness."

Payapang Daigdig means "peaceful world."

— Jeanne Schinto

"A Philippine Christmas in San Diego"
Saturday, December 2,
1:00 – 5:00 p.m.
St. Rita's Church
5115 Churchward Avenue
Southeast San Diego
Free
Info: 619-477-3383 or
www.pasacat.org

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