

A Filipino Tradition: The Role of Fireworks and Firecrackers in the Philippine Culture

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ABSTRACT

Fireworks in the Philippines took roots in many forms such as in celebration of religious fiestas, festivals and festivities, and New year celebrations. Its popularity among Filipinos is widely-known across the archipelago. This study aims to highlight the practice of fireworks and firecrackers in the Philippine setting and how it was integrated as a part of Filipino culture since the Chinese were the ones who invented it for religious purposes.

Keywords: Firecrackers, Fireworks, Pyrotechnics, Cultural History, Cultural Diffusion

Fireworks and firecrackers are explosive devices commonly used to celebrate many occasions. It is a public form of entertainment which gives a colorful scenery in the middle of peaceful skies. It also marks the overall success of the program. Fireworks exude a sense of triumph, making it a popular ceremonial exhibition in community events such as concerts, fiestas, processions, Easter Sunday and the New Year. Some cultural groups meanwhile employ fireworks as part of exorcism as it is also believed to startle and drive evil spirits away.

The use of fireworks is common in most forms of Filipino celebrations but is also regarded with economic value particularly in Bocaue, a town in the Bulacan province, which is located at the central part of Luzon. Bocaue is known as the center of the fireworks industry, as it which is known to produce class A and high-quality fireworks. As the significant manufacturing and distribution site of fireworks in the country, Bocaue gained the reputation of being the "Fireworks Capital of the Philippines." This industry also generates profit for fireworks retailers, dealers, and manufacturers in Bocaue specifically in seasons when there is high demand in the market, particularly during the season fiesta, Santacruzán, Flores de Mayo in May, as well as the season of Christmas and New Year in the last quarter of December.

To start, the word Pyrotechnics refers to the art of making and lighting off fireworks for display. It also pertains to the crafting of specialized flammable chemical into a single firecracker shell. Legend tells that the idea originated from China when some Chinese alchemist unexpectedly substances such as nitrate, sulfur, and charcoal, that when lit produced a colorful burst of light. This man also noticed that a tremendous explosion occurs when the mixture is placed and lit to an enclosed bamboo stalk, thereby creating the firecrackers.

The idea of lighting firecrackers was intended for entertainment purposes in China, not until when the Venetian merchant and explorer Marco Polo brought this so-called `invention` to Europe. He wrote an account of this event in his journal after his trip from China that fireworks were finally later became known to the Europeans. Since then, the West innovated the Chinese fireworks and turned it into a weapon. The main island of the Philippines, particularly Luzon, has been known to the Chinese, long before the Spanish conquest in the Philippines.¹ For the Chinese, it was named *Luzong* which appears in the text in the form of Lu-sung.²

In the Philippines, the use of firecrackers took its roots in the province of Bulacan, more specifically, in the town of Bocaue. It was Valentin Sta. Ana who learned this craftsmanship from the parish priest in the town of Santa Maria, Bulacan in 1867.³ The Parish priest used a *kwitis* to wake up the parishioners in preparation for Misa de Gallo. Only specialists could handle and manufacture these fireworks, but the priest taught the basics of the Firecracker-making to Valentin until he was able to master it. Before Valentin died, he passed all his knowledge regarding how to create and produce Firecrackers unto his two children; namely Valerio, and Fernando Sta. Ana.⁴ Today, Fireworks companies like the Dragon fireworks, Platinum, and Sta. Ana Fireworks are considered to be the top manufacturers of the fireworks and firecrackers not only in Bocaue but throughout the whole archipelago as well.

A more structured industry of fireworks has been attached to Bocaue as it is mostly accessible to many Filipinos. Fireworks vendors in the cities can quickly go to Bocaue to purchase wholesale stock. People living in farther provinces nevertheless also consider traveling miles of distances to buy firecrackers in

¹ Mauro Garcia, *Readings in the Philippine Prehistory* (The Filipiniana Book Guild: Manila, 1979) 144.

² Mauro Garcia, *Readings in the Philippine Prehistory*

³Editors of Bulacan.gov.ph. "Pyrotechnics." Accessed February 5, 2018, <https://www.bulacan.gov.ph/business/pyrotechnics.php>.

⁴ Editors of Bulacan.gov.ph. "Pyrotechnics." "Pyrotechnics"

Bocause because the place already called the attention of the masses. Also, many Public organizations, private firms, and nonprofit personnel utilize fireworks for every ceremonies and event. For this reason, the municipal of Bocause became known for what it is today.

However, even though it is viral among the Bocauenos, there have been few accounts published nor written about the study of fireworks in the history of the Philippines. There is limited information about the history of firework-making in the country. Following that, the researcher now aims to contribute to this particular area in the historiography of the Philippines. However, this study will not cover all the gaps but would be of substantial aid as a reference for the future researchers who would like to have more comprehensive knowledge about the practice of fireworks and firecrackers in the Philippine setting; particularly in the town of Bocause, Bulacan.

Culturally speaking, this custom is a foreign practice to Filipinos, as coming from China possibly through the Chinese traders and Filipino traders. Now embedded in the culture of Filipino, the use of fireworks has become a local tradition for celebrating festivities.

Firecrackers and Fireworks as a Mode of Entertainment

The element of fire remained a mystic and religiously significant to men from time immemorial.⁵ One of the most arresting and suggestive metaphors of fire is that it represents anger and judgment because of the heat and its destructive capacity and power As seen in the bible when God appeared in the burning bush in the Bible.⁶ Fire has many uses, if not as an object for worship; it serves as an instrument for consecration such as the thunderbolt of Zeus, The Promethean gift, the cleansing pyre of Hindu, the Norse burial of the Vikings, and the eternal flame of the unknown soldiers' tomb located in Moscow, Russia.⁷

Since then, fire is utilized for art, with fireworks as an excellent work of burst of fire. One of its common usages is to entertain the audiences with its magnificent and luminous lights covering the sky. Fireworks are classified between Consumer fireworks and Display fireworks, which people could distinguish according to its usage: Consumer fireworks pertain to fireworks

⁵ Edward Fenton," Fireworks," *The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin*, v.13, no.2 (1954), 51

⁶ Eugene Merrill, "Fire". Accessed February 20, 2018, <https://www.biblestudytools.com/dictionary/fire/>

⁷ Fenton, "Fireworks"

devices which are sold at neighborhood stands for easy reach and public use. On the other hand, Display Fireworks are devices used for large community display, administered by licensed professionals or Pyrotechnician.⁸ Hence, there is a hierarchical sequence to follow since not all types of fireworks are intended for use by all consumers.⁹ Consumer Fireworks are available on sale at the public market and are often used in celebrations like weddings, birthday parties, and other events to project it as grandiose and fabulous.¹⁰

Fireworks are commonly created to produce colorful lights and audible effects through combustion which is visible for a limited radius and diameter. There are various types of Fireworks depending on the desired effect the consumer wants to use; and for each desired effect, the chemical composition of the powder must be different and systematically arranged in a sequential manner.¹¹

Filipinos direct much of their current interest on fireworks to visual enjoyment such the artistic symmetries and color combinations for every blast in the night sky. However, fireworks with ambient noise are already desirable as it calls the attention of the spectators by the startling sounds it produces. The use of fireworks is common here in the Philippines. An example of which could be observed from *fiestas*, *Flores de Mayo* or Santa Cruzan, Wedding, and many parties and concerts which includes Film and Movie Awards, The Pyrotechnic Competition which is annually held in Mall of Asia Arena, and some school events like that of the UST Paskuhan in UST that many students waited and longing to see. Since then, fireworks became a part of celebrating certain events and activities in the culture of the Filipinos.

Fireworks are typically launched from a mortar tube that is fixed on the ground from which they are ignited and then explodes when it reaches the peak of its trajectory by a time-delay fuse set until it runs out of powder.¹² The usual form of these explosive devices is contained in a 'bombshells' which usually are made from Kraft paper and contains explosive compositions like black powder, which is considered as the burst charge.¹³

⁸ American Pyrotechnics Association, "*Frequently Asked Questions*". Accessed February 17, 2018. <http://www.americanpyro.com/frequently-asked-questions>

⁹ American Pyrotechnics Association, "*Frequently Asked Questions*".

¹⁰ Ambekar, Kim, and Yoh "*Characterization of Display Pyrotechnic Propellants: Colored Light*"

¹¹ Carlos Alberca, and Camren Ruiz, "Analytical Techniques for the Analysis of Consumer Fireworks", *Trends in Analytical Chemistry*, no.56 (2014): 29.

¹² Ambekar, Kim, and Yoh "*Characterization of Display Pyrotechnic Propellants: Colored Light*"

¹³ Ambekar, Kim, and Yoh "*Characterization of Display Pyrotechnic Propellants: Colored Light*"

The Industry of Fireworks located in Bocaue, Bulacan is one of the hot spots for establishing a fireworks business. In an interview, it also shows that the quality of firecrackers sold in Bocaue is much proficient compared to the other regions. They are one of the best crafters that can be found in the Philippines and the town of Sta. Maria, Municipal of Bocaue is very famous and well-known for that especially during the onset of New Year which makes Bocaue the fireworks capital of the Philippines.¹⁴

Filipinos who are looking for big-time sellers and high-quality products of firecrackers and fireworks in their pursuance of celebrating New Year¹⁵ with a bang starts to flock into this district.¹⁶ Across the streets and highway are filled with fireworks` retailers selling their goods to those buyers, and all the buyers need to do is ask. These purveyors cater different types of fireworks that vary with regards to their noise level: from lowest to loudest; its ambient effects: from spectacular to being grandeur; and effectiveness the consumer can choose from.

In the same manner, in the article of David Hall which is entitled, "*Reviving a Forgotten Pyrotechnical Art Form: Pyrotechnics and Twentieth-Century Performance Art*"¹⁷ indicates that aerial display fireworks that were being launched to the sky are more popular than ground-based firecrackers such as fountain fireworks, Sawa, Piccolo, Lusion, and Goodbye Philippines. Ground-based firecrackers require a large portion of land which it can be ignited, and igniters should be cautious and alert at all times to prevent injuries.

On the other hand, aerial display fireworks such as kwitis, sparklers, and butterfly could be set on the roofs, vessel ships, or on an elevated ground that is preferably isolated from the public. Fireworks are meant to be seen from any direction and must appear equal.¹⁸ It is preferable this way since aerial display fireworks bursts in the sky with an approximate radius of 400 meters, making

¹⁴ Keith Calayag, "*Fireworks Stores in Bocaue, Bulacan Expect Lower Sales*". Accessed February 20, 2018, <http://www.sunstar.com.ph/manila/local-news/2015/12/28/fireworks-stores-bocaue-bulacan-expect-lower-sales-449013>

¹⁵ The New Year is the best season where sales of fireworks and firecrackers are high according to an interview also.

¹⁶ Keith Calayag, "*Fireworks Stores in Bocaue, Bulacan Expect Lower Sales*". Accessed February 20, 2018, <http://www.sunstar.com.ph/manila/local-news/2015/12/28/fireworks-stores-bocaue-bulacan-expect-lower-sales-449013>

¹⁷ David Hall, "Reviving a Forgotten Pyrotechnical Art Form: Pyrotechnics and Twentieth-Century Performance Art", *The MIT Press*, v.24, no.5 (1991), pp.531-534.

¹⁸ David Hall, "Reviving a Forgotten Pyrotechnical Art Form: Pyrotechnics and Twentieth-Century Performance Art"

it visible to a large audience. The fireworks are meant to be enjoyed from any direction, appearing equal.¹⁹

Fireworks became an instrument to celebrate events not only in the town of Bocaue but also in different provinces of the Philippines. Many utilize fireworks as a form of entertainment while others integrate it into traditional practices. To give examples of how many Filipinos use these fireworks and firecrackers, here are some of the significant events and festivals in the country will be discussed below:

Fireworks in Fiestas

To cite one of the commonly known usages of fireworks is that, it became a medium for the celebration of festivities such as the '*fiestas*'. Fiestas in the Philippines stand as a symbol and venue of Filipino culture and community as well.²⁰ It is considered as an anchor, more like a cultural anchor of the Filipino community that is the embodiment of our identity and rootedness which defines Filipino's national character as a personalist and communitarian being, who is deeply rooted and loyal to a small intimate clannish community, that predates back to pre-Hispanic period of the Philippines.²¹

The role of the fiesta in the service of Spanish regime was to carry their notion of true faith to God. It was their method of civilized life and of political order that is ordained by God, and to easily make the natives that are in the remote areas to follow them.²² They were purposely deployed to ensure collective attitudes and behavior of the natives to subjugate themselves to the colonial power.²³ It can be that; a hegemonic approach was seen to be a method of pacification and imposed it on the rest of the population; since it does not use a violent force to control their subjects.

A kind of domination that implies a measure of consent by those at the bottom, in toto, the natives.²⁴ it may seem indulgent, but this form of political

¹⁹ David Hall, "Reviving a Forgotten Pyrotechnical Art Form: Pyrotechnics and Twentieth-Century Performance Art"

²⁰ Florentino Hornedo, "Culture Community in the Philippine Fiesta and Other Celebration", *Quarterly Scholarly Journal of the University of Santo Tomas* v. 73, no. 1 (2000):51

²¹ Florentino Hornedo, "Culture Community in the Philippine Fiesta and Other Celebration" (UST Publishing House: Manila, 2000), 19.

²² Reinhard Wendt, "Philippine Fiesta and Colonial Culture" *Philippine Studies* v. 46, no. 1 (1998) 5

²³ Reinhard Wendt, "Philippine Fiesta and Colonial Culture"

²⁴ John Charles Chasteen, "Born in Blood and Fire" (W. W. Norton & Company Inc.: New

power is irrepressible and does devastating damage to the mental health of people at the bottom since they tend to be consciously or unconsciously aware in accepting their inferiority, thus participating in their subjugation.²⁵

Hornedo was right in describing some of the observable manifestations in a fiesta. He included some descriptions about how Filipino fiestas are ornamented. These include the colors and glitters, and vibrant sound effect since it is a shared identity which can be observed across the Philippine islands. First, it can be a form of glitter and color because fireworks itself is an of visual art. The name already speaks for itself and using fireworks display adds immensely to the festive ambiance and is valued by the locals as an index of their fiesta's success.²⁶

Fiestas are packed with a diversity of activities and to name a few, street decorations, novenas, processions, and Eucharistic celebrations, parades, street dancing, *palaro*²⁷, and fireworks.²⁸ These folk elements showcases define delineates the festive mood of how Filipinos value their tradition and add splendor to the overall event. Fiestas today come with their trends such as multicolored and glittering `banderitas' and streamers hanging across the street is preferable now. For it emits a strong sense of happiness to an individual. It is a sign to publicize a season of feast, supplemented by the colorful decoration of public buildings, and colorful lights. Using of Fireworks is now a fashion to showcase the artistic side of Filipinos since, making of fireworks requires a high level-skill of craftsmanship to produce an aesthetic effect while a vibrant sound is coming from the exploding fireworks, helps and maintains the enthusiasms of the people to participate during the festivities actively. Fireworks help the celebration of fiestas in many ways. It arouses Filipino noisy carnival spirit, especially if it is not some ordinary fireworks display but a pyrotechnic display already.

Fireworks synchronized with good music creates an excellent and lively ambiance. This style of presentation is referred to today as "Pyrotechnics Display." Fireworks and Pyrotechnics may be the same in considering they are both explosive devices, but their difference is that fireworks can be ignited by anyone unskillfully whereas Pyrotechnics display requires a professional technician to operate it.

York, 2006) 66.

²⁵ Wendt *"Born in Blood and Fire"*

²⁶ Hornedo, *"Culture Community in the Philippine Fiesta and Other Celebration,"*16.

²⁷ A term in the Philippine society which pertains to the indigenous game.

²⁸ Reynaldo Alexandro; Millie Reyes; Vicente Roman Santos, *"Fiesta Fiesta: Festival Foods of the Philippines"*, (KCC Innovations, Inc.: Manila, 2008) 18.

One reason is, Pyrotechnics are handed and operated easier compared to the ordinary fireworks. It is preprogrammed and electronically fired using remotes, and it is synchronized to the beat of the music to make it more realistic, dramatic, and lively to the spectators.²⁹ The pyro ones can be used in close proximity, making it more an indoors-use which can be seen in stadiums, concerts, and the opening of Olympics where sparklers lit on stage.³⁰

Fireworks in Festivals

The use of Fireworks on festivals such as fiestas can create positive feedback from the audience. The more fantastic and well-performed a festival is, can generate more people to come for viewing it as a form of their entertainment and subsequently, the organizers and vendors as well can have their income from the tourists.

The Paskuhan of UST would be a great example. Known for its Fireworks Display, UST consumes a large portion of fireworks annually as a form of entertainment to make the Thomasian community livelier. The event was first celebrated in 1991 to highlight the Filipino tradition of *panunubuyan* and at the same time to collect donations for the victims of Typhoon Uring.³¹

For Thomasians, it is the most awaited event to experience the season of Christmas. The fame of Paskuhan cannot only be solely attributed to the *fireworks*, but is also known because of the famous bands that perform on the stage and the so-called Agape where the community shares food.³²

The Christmas vibe will be incomplete without witnessing the lighting of Christmas lanterns and lights around the campus. Since it is a prelude for the incoming Paskuhan part, an introductory part that symbolizes there is a second part that students must expect for themselves. As part of its many highlights like the open concert that has many band performers, of course, the colorful fireworks of UST will not get lagged behind. A duration of six to ten-minute

²⁹ Paul Singh, *Firework or Pyrotechnic*.

³⁰ FrontierFireworks.com, "Pyrotechnics". Accessed February 17, 2018, <http://www.frontierfireworks.co.uk/section-5-Pyrotechnics.php>

³¹ Since then, Paskuhan was celebrated every last quarter of the year. Tomas U. Santos, "Christmas in our Hearts". Accessed March 6, 2018, http://varsitarian.net/news/20081117/christmas_in_our_hearts

³² When in Manila.com Team. "Don't Miss UST's Annual Paskuhan". Accessed February 20, 2018 <http://www.wheninmanila.com/do-not-miss-ust-annual-paskuhan/>

pyro-musical display is not bad either. Belting their tunes to the pleasure of the audience and crowd is an amusement for everyone.³³

It is worth remembering to overlook and witness this kind of event since it is celebrated only once a year and people cannot turn back time even if they pleased. Rain or shine, the Paskuhan must go on. Despite the weather that we cannot hundred percent sure to predict in Metro Manila, it was reported that an estimation of sixty thousand Thomasian and non-Thomasian visitors attended the University's annual yuletide event.³⁴

The New Year Festival

Greeting the new year by igniting firecrackers is another Filipino custom.³⁵ Many Filipinos are familiar with this routine. They think that it is an excellent way to start their day, a simile of how shiny and bright the colors of the firecrackers to a bright future ahead. Some people attend the midnight mass, and others go to a party. It can be observed that many people would choose to stay awake at night to experience this once in a year event, but a fact also exists that, it is inevitable due to the loud noises that people will hear outside; a hindrance for them to sleep peacefully.

Many children and adults begin to ignite the firecrackers which they had bought from a store. While boys enjoy making some loud rackets, girls satisfy themselves with *luces* or lights. As the New year ushers in, a beautiful fireworks display can be seen lighting up in the night sky, and sometimes it keeps on this way until the sunrise begin to show.³⁶

The Chinese New Year

Just like people across the globe had their way of celebrating their New year's; for the Chinese, the commencement of New Year, which in Chinese terms, the Lunar New Year, signifies merry-making, time for feasting, as well as the break

³³ Bong Lozada; Julliana Love de Jesus, “#Inquirerseven UST Paskuhan 2014: Yea or Nay?”. February 20, 2018, <http://lifestyle.inquirer.net/179973/inquirerseven-ust-paskuhan-2014-yay-or-nay/>.

³⁴ Maria Crisanta Paloma, “Paskuhan Pushes Through Despite Rain”. Accessed February 20, 2018, <http://varsitarian.net/news/20161217/paskuhan-pushes-through-despite-rain>

³⁵ Amparo Lardizabal, Felicitas Leogardo, “*Readings on Philippine Culture and Social Life*” (Rex Bookstore: Manila, 1970) 116.

³⁶ Amparo Lardizabal, Felicitas Leogardo, “*Readings on Philippine Culture and Social Life*,” 117.

for the farmers who plow lands for rice. In mainland China, the New Year festival begins at midnight and is ushered in by offering ceremonies, incense burnings, and numerous other rites that lasted until daylight.³⁷ Many temples are lighted up, pagodas are illuminated, and there are candles in every domestic idol in each house to pay tribute to their ancestors and to guide them towards their life decisions.

In the Philippines, it is not unusual for people to celebrate the essence of Chinese New Year since there's a vast population of pure Chinese and half Chinese alike are living here inside the country. They considered this event important since it is the first day of the new year, which marks the 1st day of the Gregorian calendar. This festival is as important as a practical holiday for finishing unsettled businesses in preparation for the future.³⁸ considered this festival an essential celebration that even Chinese farmers in China took their rest. It is also a celebration of continuity and family life, a practical holiday for finishing old business and preparing for the future.

For over a millennium, these immigrants from mainland China had established closer and diplomatic ties with the Filipinos since the dynasty of the Song. Since then, a mutual relationship h established, and the Filipinos in particular, gradually embrace their religious traditions, beliefs, and rich culture which includes the zodiac signs, horoscope, the system of beliefs, and even their new year itself.³⁹

In line with Chinese `domination`, there are places called Chinatown which symbolizes unity among the Chinese Community. It is for that purpose that the Chinatown in Binondo was established. It is a bridge not only among the Chinese individuals but moreover, the friendship and camaraderie of Filipinos and Chinese people. At the onset of Chinese Lunar New Year, it is expected to have a program of noisy carnival spirit, lighting of firecrackers, and the famous Lion and Dragon dance.

Fireworks as a Contest

Another one would be the Philippine International Pyro-musical Competition that takes place at the SM Mall of Asia. Top Pyrotechnicians will be selected

³⁷ Fred Myron Colby, "New Year-The Chinese Holiday" *The Journal of Education*, v. 57, no. 5 (1903) 69.

³⁸ Shiah Mann, "Chinese New Year" 2nd Ed. (Arts Inc.: New York, 1977) 1.

³⁹ Del Cusay, "*Celebrating Chinese New Year 2017: Auspicious Celebration.*" Accessed March 20, 2018, <http://www.delcusay.com/2017/01/celebrating-Chinese-new-year-2017.html>.

across International countries to compete here in the Manila Bay, Philippines. This annual event put on a marvelous show of lights and color in the night sky and paired with invigorating genres of music.⁴⁰ Mostly, nine international countries participated in this kind of event to showcase their best of classical pyrotechnic display.⁴¹ The Pyro-musical Fireworks Display event runs through a period of five consecutive Saturdays, making way for the patrons to appreciate more of the shows.⁴²

The SM Mall of Asia is undeniably one of the perfect spots to cater to this kind of event since considering its location, it is very close to the capital, near the shoreline and the airport. In this way, the venue is very accessible both in Land, and Sea. Also, the venue is well-equipped with a variety of high-class facilities and amenities which can be convenient for the guests and the management as well; since they would feel at ease. Due to its topnotch features, for instance, the leisure, dining, thousands of retails, and entertainment establishments, it can easily lure people to book for an outing and stop by and take their time while waiting for the fireworks display to start.⁴³

Once an act becomes a habit, it is now difficult to break because it becomes integrated into our personalities which results in a formation of a new pattern in life.⁴⁴ The habit of igniting fireworks does not only occur to a single entity but can also transpire unto others, and these create customs. Filipinos are clever-improvising people. The reason is that the practice gradually reduced from foreign to domestic one; Filipinos were open to other ideologies, and we have had applied it to our culture ourselves; a process of merging two cultures called, acculturation. Hence, culture in the Philippines is widely recognized to be astonishingly beautiful and diversified yet, intrinsic in its tradition.

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⁴¹ Editors of web.archive.org, "Event Description". accessed February 21,2018, <https://web.archive.org/web/20051229041339/http://www.worldpyroolympics.com/about/eventdescription.php>.

⁴² Editors of web.archive.org, "Event Description".

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