

Filipinos import Christmas traditions from home

Holiday season is a time for food, fireworks and plenty of noise

Tiare Rath
Daily Star staff

Maria Elena Fe Libertad misses the noise. In her home country, midnight on Dec. 25 turns into a massive celebration, with people spilling into the streets, shouting and setting off fireworks.

But this is Lebanon, and here, she said, "there is no noise."

Libertad is one of an estimated 15,000 to 20,000 Filipinos – the vast majority of them Catholics – who will celebrate Christmas in Lebanon this year. Although their community is large and their faith a significant part of their culture, few will be able to observe the Christmas holiday in the traditional manner as their primary employment is in the service industry.

"It (can) really feel lonely during the time of Christmas, especially when they can't go to church," said Gestie Advincula, also known as Father Augustine, who is the religious leader for the Filipino Christian community in Lebanon.

"They will always remember

their family because for us, Christmas is a family day."

"The important thing is the family – you get together," explained Joanne Asuncion, who works at Shogun restaurant in downtown. "But here you're alone, just working. You cannot celebrate here because all you have ... is work."

With a nine-day mass known as Misa de Aguinaldo, Christmas in the Philippines is closer to a two-week affair than a one-day celebration. But for most Filipinos here, the festivities shrink to one-day celebration held on Sunday, which rarely falls on Dec. 25.

Sunday is usually the day off given to maids who work in Lebanon, and the country's Filipino community is largely made up of service workers and house maids. Only the fortunate are able to attend all nine Misa de Aguinaldo masses – each lasting an hour – preceding Christmas.

"It's very important," said Father Augustine. "Christmas would not be complete without these nine days of masses."

Misa de Aguinaldo is tradi-



Madrid, Pajonconi and Temporosa light candles at St. Francis Church in Hamra following a Misa de Aguinaldo service

tionally held at 4am. Here Father Augustine conducts an early-morning service at Azarieh (Lazarite) Church in Achrafieh to accommodate those who can make it, but those who can take more personal time than just Sundays usually attend the alternate mass at St. Francis Church in Hamra at 6pm.

"It depends on the employer," said Mercy Madrid, one of 50 people at the first Misa de Aguinaldo mass last Saturday.

Avic, who did not want her last name used, spent six years

working as a private maid in Verdun and now baby-sits Asuncion's 3-year-old daughter. She said while she generally got along with her employers, they usually only let her take Sundays off, even on Christmas.

"I asked, and they would say no," she said. "They can't because they have a baby."

"This is the big problem because most of the Filipino workers here are tied up with their employers and can't leave. We're quite lucky that I have regular working hours," said Julius Sa-

gusay, the Lebanon leader of the Philippines-based Couples for Christ who also works at an advertising agency.

Christmas masses for the Filipino community will be held on Tuesday, Dec. 25, but many will instead attend mass two days beforehand. The services in Achrafieh will include a mass honoring employers.

In his four years in Lebanon, Father Augustine has heard horror stories from some Filipinos who were locked in rooms, abused and had their pay withheld. As a result, many question why he insists on inviting employers and giving them angels for the "day of gratitude," as he calls it. He answers that by providing them with employment, most have improved the way of life for the workers' families at home.

"Usually those who would respond and attend the day of gratitude are the good employers," he said. "As for the bad ones, we can't reach out to them."

A party will be held after the service where Filipino Christmas delicacies will be served

and a contest will be held to judge the best *parol*, a traditional Filipino lantern usually made in the shape of the star. The lanterns are an important element of Christmas, and are hung across the Philippines as early as September.

Madrid and her friends Sally Temporosa and Brenda Pajonconi have already made parols to hang in their rooms for the holidays, and plan to enter the contest on Dec. 23. The day will be more like Christmas than Dec. 25, as they, like many others, will work on Christmas.

Work will interfere with another Filipino tradition, which is to hop from house to house, eating and exchanging gifts at each on Christmas day. Ten Filipinos who have their own apartments, including Sagusay, will celebrate the custom, which he described as "like a fiesta."

His 22-year-old daughter Emmylou said they felt fortunate that they were able to attend Christmas mass and the Misa de Aguinaldo.

But, she said, even they will miss the noise.

STAR SCENE



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Nabil Kazan, Khalil Abou Chawareb, Roger Zeiler, Alexander Rowe and Anthony Bonja

Beauty pageant to be held in Beirut

Jihane Akoury
Special to The Daily Star

A press conference was held Wednesday at the Monroe Hotel in Beirut, prior to the Miss Europe 2001 beauty pageant, which will take place on Dec. 29 at the Beirut International Exhibition and Leisure Center.

Roger Zeiler, president of Mondial Events Organization, predicted that "European ambassadors will discover this wonderful country and fall under its charm."

Khalil Abou Chawareb, New-TV's vice-chairman, explained that television coverage of the event would also help millions to learn more about Lebanon. Anthony Bonja, chairman of Bonja Group, said co-organizing this event was a reflection of the group's belief in elegance and in Lebanon's cultural heritage.

Photos by Khalil Hassan

Striking design melds with social commentary in architect's work

'Things are possible in Beirut, which aren't possible anywhere else'

Samar Kanafani
Daily Star staff

Architect Bernard Khoury gets a kick out of flirting with the indulgences of the Lebanese leisure class, building social commentary as he entertains their wildest whims in an intentionally awkward juxtaposition with impoverished surroundings.

Famed by his design of the B018 nightclub, Khoury finds joy in contradictions.

But at no time during his interview with The Daily Star last week did the 30-something Harvard graduate, student of the renowned French architect Jean Nouvel and holder of a Borromini Special Mention Award, slip into criticism of the lifestyle of wealthy people who frequent his nightspots.

That would be easy. His concepts smack of cynicism, but Khoury makes no false pretenses of moral superiority over the sinner of society to which he belongs.

Rather than step aside and point his finger at the irony of privileged entertainment in the midst of human hardship, he takes his place within the presumed circle of blame.

"Architecture is a political act and involves marking the city with social, political and economic situations," he said,



A computer-generated cross-section of the Japanese restaurant

adding, "the more one is specific in doing so, the more interesting the city becomes."

In his latest project, a Japanese restaurant on Damascus Road, Khoury has guests carried on a 4.5-meter wide circular pad down a vertical 7.5-meter glass shaft into a subterranean dining area. Diners arrive in a banquet-like fashion, in view of the already-seated guests.

Instead of having the guests'

names announced, Khoury is contemplating installing video cameras in the shaft and transmitting real-time images of the arrival ceremony to the internet, where diners' friends "can watch them from Paris or New York."

When his client first approached Khoury about the project, he "realized that the project was so out of place that it couldn't possibly be built anywhere else," he said with a mischievous smile.

"We've already missed too many opportunities to comment on the complexity of our society," he added more soberly.

Located right outside the Beirut Central District, and just out of reach of the government's large-scale reconstruction efforts, which Khoury alternately brands "naive," "romantic" and "insipid," the restaurant – when completed in January – will be adjacent to a disheveled building that houses families displaced by the war.

With all the building's functions kept underground – the arrival pad and glass shaft alone are visible from the street – the Japanese restaurant and club take to extremes the notion of exclusive access for a given social circle, both isolating and protecting its members from the bleak and troubled reality outside.

The outcome is an "introverted" structure, he said,

which asserts itself in the city with all its clean formalism, but also negotiates with the city's unavoidable constraints.

"My architecture isn't your typical sweet romantic story. It looks for and underlines situations, using the city's specifics," Khoury said in his office in Zouk.

Like his two other major designs here (B018 and a restaurant called Central in Gemai-ze), Khoury dubs the Japanese restaurant a "vulgar program," meaning that it bears witness to a set of social, economic and political contradictions in a manner so extreme as to assume prominent presence in the city.

However, Khoury said, "the danger of doing such projects is that they are misunderstood." According to him, because of the lack of opportunities after the war for architects to design new buildings for public institutions – those existing were either unharmed or renovated – political intervention through architecture has been transferred to private projects.

"To design a restaurant is similar to designing a barber shop. Strange, but things are possible in Beirut, which aren't possible anywhere else."

The ceremony of arrival and inter-class tensions also figure in the design of Central, a restaurant/pub which Khoury



The cylindrical bar at Central – the cover can slide open to the night air

built in an old house on the verge of disintegration, completed in September.

Mimicking the "surgical" methods used in the rehabilitation of war-torn buildings in the BCD, Khoury wrapped the house in metal bracing to reinforce it, gutted its internal supporting walls, and then designed and rebuilt its interior.

But instead of re-plastering the external walls, as Solidere did in BCD, he kept the metal bracing and left the crumbling sandstone walls naked and eroding.

With a new wall built to protect and shield the interior from weather, the concept of protecting and maintaining the exclusivity of a certain class is as pre-

sented here as it was in the Japanese restaurant.

The external deterioration, which Khoury calls "a poetry of deterioration," is sharply contrasted by the clean and polished surfaces inside.

By far the most striking element of Central is a rectangular dining table, which Khoury designed to look like a conference table, fitting it with microphone-looking lights.

A passage leads directly from the kitchen to the center of the table, where the waiter is trapped and confined to either serving the guests or returning to the kitchen – another of Khoury's blatant remarks on class differences and designated social roles.

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JUST A THOUGHT

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George Eliot,
English author (1819-1880)