All Saints Day in the Philippines

All Saints' Day or "Undas" is a unique celebration in the Philippines to honor their dead. It is a major event celebrated with much fanfare and aplomb by the entire populace from Aparri to Jolo of various religious convictions and orientations. It is a day that is declared a public holiday to give every Filipino the occasion to pause and visit the tombs of their dearly beloved in public or private cemeteries.

Nine days prior to November 1st, every Filipino family with a departed loved one starts the commemoration with a nine-day novena intended for the eternal repose of the soul(s) of departed family member(s). There are "magdadasal" (prayer brigades) composed generally of two elderly women who team up to recite special prayers for the poor souls in purgatory. The prayers have strong catholic orientation and generally invoke the passion of Christ to deliver the souls from their damnation in purgatory into heaven or paradise. The "magdadasals" are paid a measly sum for this service. They go from house to house for nine consecutive days to recite the written prayers that have been automatically memorized due to constant and repetitive usage. For the wealthy families, the novena prayers for the poor souls in purgatory, are replaced by nine day novena masses celebrated in different churches. The parish churches also charge a fee for this service. All the tombs are prepared prior to the big November 1st celebration. They are cleaned, whitewashed and decorated with abundant candles and flowers. In remote barrios of distant provinces, people offer a particular kind of flower called Amarillo, which in Spanish means "yellow". Tall grasses surrounding the tombs are cut and tended. Everything is done to make the tombs as clean and as beautifully attractive as they should be. It is an expression of boundless love and affection for their departed loved ones and family member(s).

Particularly common in the provinces, nine days before November 1st, young teenagers serenade houses with songs for the dead. It is called "nangangaluluwa" which literally means lost souls promenading. If in America, they have caroling during Christmas season, in the Philippines, they have "Nangangaluluwa" during All Saints Day. This is a tradition that is unique in the world. A naughty element of this tradition is the stealthy robbing of chickens during the mortuary serenade. The serenading is usually done after 12 midnight to ensure that the people being serenaded are totally asleep.

On the very day itself of the celebration, which is November 1st; the family lights candles on home altars at about 3:00 P.M. and recite special prayers for the dead. It is the general belief that it is at about this time, that the souls of all faithful departed are released from the portals of heaven or purgatory to be with their living loved ones. Family members bring the photo of the dead and place it on a prominent location over the tomb. While gathering around the tomb, they pray and keep vigil as early as 7 a.m. until the wee hours of the next morning. During their wake, they eat, pray, and continuously light candles on the tombs. They also play cards or "mahjong". It is a reunion of sorts. A commemoration of the dead but highlighted by feasting and games. They bring stereo components or for less rich families, transistor radios and play music and dance while keeping their wake. Loud music and dancing, is believed to ward off unwanted souls and bad spirits. Some families with Chinese lineage light red candles and burn incense. They also burn money and mock houses made of carton which they believe will be used by the departed when he/she returns to the nether world. A food offering is also prepared. For the Filipinos, a

special delicacy is prepared which is called “Suman”. It is a rice cake wrapped in banana leaves and steamed until cooked. It is normally eaten with a kind of sweet sauce made out of molasses and peppered with grated coconut.

By around 12 midnight, youthful swains go the rounds of cemeteries to pick flowers and candles left on the tombs. These stolen flowers are gathered and mounted in a kind of tomblike arrangement called “Tumba” or tombs in the town plaza. There, youngsters mimic the dead. A weak member of the gang is chosen to lie as a dead corpse. They put make up so he looks like a dead person and is forced to lie like a dead body surrounded by lighted candles and crown of flowers until dawn breaks.

On November 2, which is All Souls’ Day, people light candles at 8 am because it is the common belief that it is at this time of the day, that the souls return to purgatory or heaven to join the Almighty.