

Filipino Customs and Traditions: Courtship, Engagement and Marriage

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My brother-in-law, who is in his late twenties, is traveling back to the Philippines for the very first time since he and my husband's family came to the United States to emigrate more than two decades ago. Before he left for the Philippines we (my husband, sisters and brothers-in-law, cousins, uncles, aunts, and I) gave him some pointers in regards to the Filipino customs and traditions. My brother-in-law has been in the United States since he was a toddler, although growing up in a Filipino home; he has more American influences in him than Filipino.

The reason for the trip was more than just an abrupt or spur of the moment decision. He is going back to the Philippines with my mother-in-law to meet the family of his fiancée who he met and got engaged with here in the United States. Since both of them are in the marrying age, they have both decided they are ready to settle down. As part of the strong Filipino upbringing of his fiancée, she had requested my brother-in-law to travel back to the Philippines and meet his future in laws.

Knowing that he may be lost and be in a bit of culture shock, we gave him some pointers on some of the customs and traditions that are commonly observed when meeting the family of the bride to be, asking formally for her hand in marriage, and other customs that are still being practiced in the Philippines.

Filipino Custom and Tradition: Courtship

Although they have dated for a while here in the United States, my brother in law has to continue to court not only his fiancée but her family as well. Courtship is one that is still being practiced among the strictest of the Filipino families. This is performed by the male (who is the suitor since it is wrong to do it the opposite way) visiting the home of the female. In the olden days, courtship doesn't start until the male suitor had obtained permission from the parents. This was done with the male suitor being accompanied by another respectable elder and approaching either the father or the mother of the female and obtaining permissions days in advanced to visit at a particular day and time.

Nowadays this form of getting the parent's permission is still being practiced in the provinces, however, due to western influences, there are some variations more adaptable to the modern times. One alternative is to make a phone call, asking for the parents' or guardian's permission through an elder to schedule a visit. Another way is for the suitor to approach the parents in a public place, and informally

asking for permission to visit. Either way, it is to show proper respect to ask for permission prior to the formal visit. Properly greeting the parents by placing the back of the right hand of the parents to the suitor's forehead is practiced to show respect. This is called ***pagmamano*** in Tagalog.

When the permission has been granted, the suitor whether accompanied by a friend or an elder will visit the girl's home and offers gifts. Gift bags or boxes of goodies or Filipino snacks purchased from a local store and flowers are generally given. The snacks or other goods are offered to the family of the girl then the flowers and special sweets (like chocolate or candies) are given to the girl. In a strict Filipino home, during courtship, the parents are present during the first visit. This is the opportunity to get to know each other. This is sometimes called courting the parents first and winning their hearts and approval then letting the boy or suitor court the girl. Subsequent visits are then scheduled if all went well during the first visit and, depending on how long the courtship will last, the answer is given by the girl with the parents' knowledge as well.

Since my brother in law and his fiancée have already dated and gone through a bit of courtship here in the United States, what he would do in his visit is to court or meet her family. He brought some ***pasalubong*** (gifts) from America which he will give to each family member. Other culture may call this as dowry but in the Filipino culture it is just plain gift-giving. No suitor should go to a girl's home without bearing gifts at least during the first visit. Then he will be introduced formally to her mother since her dad had passed away and also meet her younger siblings. His fiancée and her family would prepare a special meal and he will partake in them whole-heartedly.

Filipino Custom and Tradition: Engagement

After the courtship stage and the girl decides that she also would like to take the suitor's offer of love and commitment, then the girl will give the favorable answer to the suitor. At times it takes months before the answer is given. In the olden days, strict parents would sometimes give a series of tests, having the suitor do some chores like fetching some water from the well, cutting firewood to be used for cooking dinner, helping the father of the girl do some yard or farm work. Nowadays, a more modern approach is being performed by the suitor whereby he offers gentlemanly help to the parents, sometimes carrying groceries as he sees them walking down the streets, offering them a ride if he happens to be driving their way, doing other favors that can help win their favor and better his chances of getting the girl's love as well.

After the girl announces to the parents that she is ready to be engaged the parents would be around to congratulate the suitor. From then on, the suitor is treated like a member of the family. Sometimes, even before marriage, the suitor is introduced to the friends and relatives of the girl's immediate family as future part of the family or future son-in-law.

Engagements may take longer than a year, and then the date shall be set for marriage. During the waiting period they are free to go on dates, at times with a chaperone. Nowadays, after the first few chaperoned dates they can date on their own, especially those who live in the cities where it is not as strict as in the rural areas of the country. When the two decides that they are ready to get married, then the **pamamanhikan** (official request of the male and his parents or guardians for the girl's hand in marriage) begins. This is usually done in the evening after dinner. Then, if the parents of the girl agree, they will give them their blessings and set the date of the wedding. The engagement sometimes last from several months to a couple of years due to extensive preparations.

Filipino Custom and Tradition: Marriage

Most Filipinos would prefer a formal church wedding. No matter what their stature in life or in society is, they will make sure that the wedding is a celebration that will not be forgotten. There is a saying in the Philippines that only once in a lifetime that one will ever get married (unless widowed) ---this is true for majority of Filipinos as they do not condone or allow **divorce** in the country. Since marriage is for keeps, they plan the wedding for months, and invite friends and families from near and far to attend the special gathering. In the Philippines, the male and his family are responsible for almost all of the expenses, from the rings, food, cake, flowers, venues, bands, photographer, etc. Sometimes even the attire for the bride and her family, as well as, the wedding **entourage** is all paid for the groom. This is a symbol or proof that he is ready to take on the financial burden in life and be a provider for the family he and his wife will soon have.

In some rural areas, almost a whole town is invited to the gathering. Filipinos are known to be very gracious and very hospitable. If the gathering after the church wedding is in an outdoor venue, it is sometimes a free for all. In Filipino weddings the dancing, singing, and an abundance food are staples of the celebration. Some celebrations lasting all throughout the day, and for some for several days! Sometimes the expenses incurred are somehow recovered during the money dance whereby, traditionally, money in different bills is pinned to both the **groom** and bride's attires as they danced with guests. This tradition symbolizes wishes of prosperity and good luck to the newlyweds.

After the celebration, the newlyweds will be going to their honeymoon. When married life begins, it is not uncommon for the newlyweds to live with either the bride or groom's parents. Usually it is the bride that is brought into the groom's home. There she will learn the traits of being a good housewife and a mother from the groom's own mother. There will come a time that they may decide to live independently but, oftentimes, Filipino couples would decide to stay. This is mainly due to the close knit of the nuclear Filipino family that even the grandparents stay at home and be cared for in the later years.

Since my brother in law and his fiancée will return to America, they will not be living with any family but live independently to someday start their own family. It is true even here in America that a lot of Filipinos still practice a lot of these customs and traditions, but at times it is not very practical especially when one had already been living in a westernized culture. One thing remains though, that will not change in a Filipino, is that the very foundation of the Filipino customs and traditions lies within the family and the respect for our roots. Only when we know where we came from can we define who we are which will then guide us to where we are headed to.

I am sure after this trip, my brother in law will take with him his experience and will have a different respect toward Filipino customs and traditions that he can someday pass on to his children and the next generations after them.