

An irreverent look at Panama's Holiday's

Written by T. Rob Brown (aka Roberto Chocolate)

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This is a terrific explanation of the holiday season in Panama; from All Saints Day, The Day of the Dead, and from the Black Christ festivities to Carnival. It was written by Eric Jackson of www.thepanamanews.com

. Enjoy. Roberto

In the Public Domain

by Eric Jackson, The Panama News

We are well into the Panamanian holiday season, which by this reporter's reckoning stretches from November 3 through Carnival Tuesday. Yes, as part of the Opus Dei religious right's conception, it gets extended on each end, with the Day of the Dead on the front side and Ash Wednesday on the end with Carnival eliminated, or at best tolerated. This is a rundown of Panama's national holidays for beginners, and some other things, in parentheses, that are part of the holiday season but which I don't think particularly qualify as "national" holidays:

October 21: The Festival of the Black Christ in Portobelo, wherein maleantes and others make a pilgrimage to get their lives right with God. Although it centers on the town's Catholic church, it's not particularly favored by the Vatican. Because it's primarily --- but by no means exclusively --- a gathering of black people, it is actively disdained by Panama's white power structure, including the current crop of politicians who sent out the cops to subject it to unprecedented harassment this year. The legend is that the old colonial commercial center of Portobelo was in the grip of a deadly epidemic when this statue of a dark-skinned Christ floated ashore and miraculously banished the plague.

(November 1): All Saints Day: a Catholic thing that the current Opus Dei infiltrated government would treat as something of importance in the Panamanian culture, which it is not.

(November 2): Day of the Dead: The not-so-fun white Catholic conservative answer to Halloween. It could be a celebration of what has gone on before, but church, state and illustrious families all live in terror of Panamanians coming to grips with this country's true history.

November 3: Independence Day: The anniversary of the US-backed and Wall Street engineered Conservative coup by which Panama separated from Colombia. But Panama had be torn apart and bled white by one of the more vicious episodes of Colombia's never-ending

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internal warfare, the Thousand Day War, so almost all Panamanians were ready to be done with Colombia. When people learned the details of the treaty that a Frenchman made with the Americans on Panama's behalf, they were less thrilled and it set off a multi-generational movement to undo the damage. There are many starkly different versions of what happened, many of which focus on different aspects but aren't actually contradictory. It came down on this day in 1903 so that the moribund French concession to build a canal wouldn't be expired and could be sold at an inflated price to the Americans.

November 4: Flag Day: Foreigners had come to the isthmus with a flag for the new nation, a declaration of independence and other paraphernalia for the coup. There are official and alternative versions about the flag, but by all credible accounts on this, the day after the 1903 coup, there was at least this gesture that we'd adopt our own symbols rather than those provided by extraneous hustlers.

November 5: The surrender of Colon's Colombian garrison. More than a military confrontation, Panama's 1903 separation from Colombia was an act of bribery. The Colombian commander on the isthmus was bought. Most of the troops were in Colon, so he issued orders for the garrison's officers to come by train and meet him in Panama City. The railroad company was a central player in the plot --- its company doctor, Manuel Amador Guerrero, became the first president of Panama. The garrison officers were taken by train to a pestilential, jungle-covered, God-forsaken spot in the middle of the isthmus, at which point the engine uncoupled from the train and left them stranded there. Meanwhile back in Colon, there was a problem: it was a bank holiday, and something had to be done about the enlisted men. The owner of the Star & Herald newspaper (the ancestor of today's La Estrella), a slippery character who was hedging his bets, opened the company safe and found enough money to go around to the local liquor stores and buy enough booze to get the soldiers paralytically drunk to celebrate the holiday. When the troops woke up from their binge, they found that the US Marines had landed and there were no officers to tell them how to proceed. The local people and US forces generously offered the Colombians an opportunity to get on a ship and sail away, which they did. Colon has celebrated this victory ever since, as well it should.

November 10: The Grito de Los Santos: Panama City was the colonial administrative capital, but La Villa de Los Santos in the Azuero Peninsula was and in some respects still is the heartland of the distinctive "typical" Panamanian culture. There are legends about this foxy young farmer's daughter, Rufina Alfaro, infiltrating the police barracks and leading the bloodless 1821 insurrection that led to its capture and destruction. What is known for sure is that at a public meeting the town notables, backed by the parish priest, called for independence from Spain, and in this they were promptly joined by people in other parts of the Central Provinces --- Chitre, Ocu, Parita, Penonome and Nata. Really it was a delayed reaction to great historical developments: the seizure of Spain by Napoleon may have been reversed on the

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European continent, but the Spanish Empire would never recover. In this neighborhood the decisive moment was a couple of years before, when Simón Bolívar and an intrepid band largely composed of adventurous Venezuelan aristocrats and exiled Irish rebels hacked their way through the rough the jungle, scaled the snow-covered Andes, and took the Spaniards by surprise at Boyaca, forcing Spain to abandon what is now Colombia. Then, on June 21, 1821, Bolívar's army followed up on that victory by smashing Spain's forces in Venezuela at Carabobo. Panama had not yet risen against Spain by then, but the handwriting was on the wall when Los Santos issued its call.

November 28: Independence from Spain: It was embarrassing for the leading citizens of Panama City, lagging not only behind most of Latin America, but behind the Santeños as well. When they got around to declaring independence in 1821, they acted as conservatively and timidly as possible. Panama was a cultural entity and economic region unto itself, a province of the old colonial Viceroyalty of New Granada. However, going it alone wasn't seriously considered by the notables. The Catholic bishop, a Peruvian, wanted Panama to join with Peru. Another faction wanted to hook up with Mexico, as the Central American provinces that were part of the old Captaincy General of Guatemala briefly did. But on this day it was decided to declare independence from Spain and become part of Bolívar's ephemeral Gran Colombia. The Spanish military commander, having previously ordered some Latin American independence activists executed at Fort San Lorenzo, gave up without a fight and escaped to Cuba with his life and such Spanish troops as remained loyal to the crown.

November 28: On this day in 1887 several civic leaders in Panama City --- large portions of whose Casco Viejo had been devastated by fires on three separate occasions, got together to form a fire department, the Cuerpo de Bomberos. (The firefighters' main holiday, however, is May 5, for which Plaza Cinco de Mayo is named. On that date in 1914, bomberos responding to a fire call near the present-day Hospital Santa Fe went about their duty unaware of an illegal clandestine fireworks factory in one of the building that caught fire. Six firefighters were killed and 16 wounded in the explosion. "Cinco de Mayo" here is thus unrelated to the Mexican holiday of the same date, which is about battle against a French-imposed "emperor.")

December 8: Mothers Day: This holiday, arguably Panama's most important one, is on the Catholic Day of the Immaculate Conception. It is not related to a famous American football play by Franco Harris. It is distinct from the US Mothers Day, which was first officially recognized in 1914. Some Panamanians wanted to join in the American practice every May, but thanks to the Catholic Church the December 8 date was chosen, unofficially in the 1920s and officially in 1930.

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(December 25): Christmas: The religious holiday goes back to way before there was a Republic of Panama. The commercial holiday is an unfortunate copy of US culture, even down to the depictions of the snow that we don't have and an inappropriately attired fat guy with white hair and a beard who is sometimes confused with the editor of The Panama News.

December 20: Anniversary of the 1989 US invasion. Although the Panagringo Catholic Archbishop of Panama at the time called it a "liberation," few who lived in El Chorrillo at the time see it that way. This date is usually not officially recognized, and when it is, it's considered a day of mourning for the hundreds of people who died.

December 31 - January 1: New Year's: There is little that is uniquely Panamanian about the drunken revelry of New Year's Eve, EXCEPT for concoctions like saril with seco and for the practice in some parts of the Interior of muñecos, which are effigies representing personalities or situations of the year that's ending that are burned on alcohol-fueled midnight bonfires. Then on New Year's Day, sometime in the afternoon, there is a traditional Panamanian meal, generally featuring sancocho and tamales. These touches make our version of New Year's special enough to consider it a "national" celebration.

January 9: The Day of the Martyrs: This solemn day marks the events of January 1964, in which at least 21 Panamanians and four Americans died in what was essentially an argument over whether or not the old Canal Zone was part of Panama. It is. People died to make it that way. Any foreigner with colonial notions ought to realize that Panama has been there and done that.

The five nights and four days preceding Ash Wednesday: Carnival: It is essentially the same pre-Lent revelry that is known in New Orleans as Mardi Gras and which is celebrated in Rio and many other places. Despite the obnoxious efforts of this country's politicians, Carnival remains a "national" celebration due to the specifically Panamanian cultural content of our version.

This, then, has been a thumbnail sketch of who and what Panama is. It is, of course, far more complicated than that.

Most of all, Panama is its people, the majority of whom the oligarchs who pretend to be the "real Panamanians" in one way or another exclude. It's a mix of races and cultural

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influences, with regional dialects of Spanish, indigenous languages, commonly spoken foreign languages, local cuisines and cultural features and few commonly accepted definitions of what it is to be Panamanian beyond "not part of Colombia" and "not part of Costa Rica."

Panama, its national symbols and its national holidays belong to all Panamanians, without regard to family ties, ethnicity, race, social class, partisan affiliation, religion, philosophy or whom a person knows. They are in the public domain and are not to be privatized or expropriated.