

One World, Many Traditions

Christmas



Christmas is the most celebrated holiday in the world. People in virtually every country celebrate it, and more than one hundred countries officially recognize it in one way or another. In the year 350, Pope Julius I, bishop of Rome, proclaimed December 25 as the official birth date of Jesus Christ. So, this is the date we celebrate; but no one knows for sure if it is the actual month and date of Christ's birth. Although Christmas has a Christian origin as the birth of Jesus, many of today's traditions are secular. Christmas has evolved over the years, with many of the traditions being relatively recent additions (since the 1800s).

Christmas traditions vary from place to place, and from family to family. For example, some people put up a Christmas tree right after Thanksgiving, while others wait until Christmas Eve. Christmas traditions in North America are a combination of those from other countries. They include going to church, Santa Claus, Christmas trees, cards, presents, carols, feasting, and lights. Every country's Christmas celebrations vary according to that country's beliefs, folklore, climate, and traditions. Some practices and symbols are common: nativity scenes, bells ringing, stars, candles, gift giving, ornaments and other decorations, and in particular decorating with greenery (evergreen trees, holly, ivy, mistletoe). And there's a common spirit – joy, hope, peace, friends and family, sharing and giving.

Some Christmas symbols: Christmas tree, Santa Claus, five-pointed star, candles, wreath, stocking, gifts.

Hanukkah



Hanukkah, the Festival of Lights, is an eight-day Jewish celebration. Depending on the year, it falls in November or December. The holiday commemorates a time when a small band of Jews, led by Judas Maccabeus, battled against the Syrians for religious freedom. The Jews won and recaptured Israel in 165 BCE.

When the Jews were preparing to rededicate their temple, they found enough oil to light the temple lamp for only one day. But, according to the legend, the oil lasted for eight days. The lighting of candles for eight consecutive nights has become the traditional way to celebrate Hanukkah. The candles are held in the *menorah*, a nine-

branch candelabra. The helper candle, called the *shammash*, is in the center of the menorah. It's lit first and used to light all of the other candles. At sundown of the first night, the first candle is lit. On each remaining night of Hanukkah, an additional candle is lit.

After the lighting of a candle, Jewish families pray, exchange gifts, sing songs, and play games. Children receive presents or *gelt* (the Yiddish word for money). They play with a top called a *dreidel*. Traditional foods include latkes, which are fried potato pancakes, usually served with apple sauce or sour cream.

Some Hanukkah symbols: menorah, candles, oil, latkes, gelt, gifts, dreidel, six-pointed star (Star of David).

Kwanzaa



Kwanzaa is a relatively new African-American holiday. In 1966, after the Watts riot in California, Dr. Maulana Karenga, a graduate student at the time, developed the holiday as a way to help heal the devastation that surrounded the riot and to help African-Americans join together in community to celebrate their strengths and their past. The word "Kwanzaa" comes from the Swahili word meaning "first." It is part of the phrase *matunda ya kwanza*, which means "first fruits." The celebration is derived from and inspired by the harvest celebrations of agricultural African peoples.

One World, Many Traditions (continued)

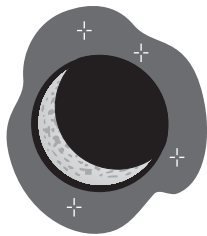
Kwanzaa is celebrated for seven days, beginning on December 26, with each day representing a different principle: *umoja*, unity; *kujichagulia*, self-determination; *ujima*, collective work and responsibility; *ujamaa*, cooperative economics; *nia*, purpose; *kuumba*, creativity; and *imani*, faith.

A candleholder, the *kinara*, holds seven candles: a black in the center, three red candles on the left (symbolizing struggle), and three green candles on the right (symbolizing hope). On each day, a candle is lit (starting with the black, then moving through the red, then through the green) and the principle of the day is discussed with examples from the past so that children have a tie to their history.

Some traditional foods prepared as part of the celebration include sweet potato pie, fried chicken, red beans and rice, steamed kale, and honey-glazed potatoes. Gifts, the *zawadi*, are not to be expensive but to be thoughtfully chosen to help children understand the Kwanzaa principles and their heritage. The *kikombe cha umoja* is a special unity cup that holds the drink used to honor ancestors in a toast. After the toast to the ancestors, all members of the family drink from the cup. The *mkeka* is a woven mat symbolizing tradition and history, the fact that who African-Americans are and what they do are tightly woven together. Ears of corn are used to symbolize each child in a family; each kernel of corn represents generations of children yet to come.

Some Kwanzaa symbols: kinara, candles, unity cup, woven mat, ears of corn, crops (fruits and vegetables to represent the importance of planting, harvesting, and working together), gifts.

Ramadan



Ramadan is one of Islam's most important celebrations. For more than 1400 years, Muslims throughout the world have fasted for the month of Ramadan. Ramadan is the name of the ninth month in the twelve-month Islamic calendar, which is based on the phases of the moon. This year, Ramadan begins around November 16 (with the first sighting of the new moon by religious leaders).

The word "Islam" is an Arabic word that means "peace." Islam's holy book is the *Qur'an*. It includes stories on the rise of Christianity and Judaism and the prophets of those religions. For Muslims, the last and most important prophet was Muhammad.

During Ramadan, Muslims do not eat or drink anything during daylight hours. They fast to show their faith in *Allah* (God) and to share the experience of those who are poor. Muslims are not required to fast until they are adults, but parents encourage children to try fasting. Fasting ends each day when the sun goes down. At sundown, people drink a little water and eat a few dates (because the prophet Muhammad broke his fast with dates). After prayer, families enjoy a meal together. Muslims pray five times a day. Although they pray wherever they find themselves, they like to pray together as a community when possible. Women and girls pray in a separate area from the men, following a centuries old tradition.

Ramadan is also a time to make amends. It's a time to end disputes and show kindness to everyone. Many families have special foods they make during Ramadan, especially sweets like cookies. Girls may decorate their hands with painted henna designs. Before the end of Ramadan, all Muslims donate to the poor the amount of money it would take to feed the number of people in their family. This reminds Muslims of the need to be generous. The donated gift is called *Zakat-ul-Fitr*.

Toward the end of Ramadan, Muslims spend more and more time praying. During the last ten days, many spend entire nights in prayer. It is during this time that the Night of Power occurs.

The end of Ramadan is celebrated with the Feast of the Fast-Breaking. It occurs on the morning after the end of Ramadan. To determine when this is, people watch for the new moon. Then they know the time of fasting has come to an end. Families get together for a big family dinner. Some Muslims give children gifts of money on the Feast of the Fast-Breaking, along with other gifts.

Some Ramadan symbols: dates, cookies, henna designs, donated gift, moon, gifts.