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MCGS Newsletter, December 2003



Enjoy a wealth of multicultural holidays in December!

December is not just a time of great sales and gifts, Santa and evergreens; mark this season as a celebration of love, life and remembrance. Americans celebrate a myriad of festivals, traditions and holidays. While some festivals celebrate heritage, like Kwanzaa, others are days of remembrance, like Chanukkah or the Feast of Our Lady of Guadalupe. Still other festivals, like Vaikunta Ekadashi, give celebrants the opportunity to destroy all their sins, and begin the new year with a purified mind.



Vaikunta Ekadashi: a time of fasting and purification

Vaikunta Ekadashi falls in the month of Margaseersha (December-January). This festival is observed with all the solemnity in the temples of Lord Vishnu. It was on this day that during the "Sagara Mathana" (churning of the ocean), 'Amrit' (nectar) emerged out of the ocean and was distributed to the Gods. The Hindus consider this day very auspicious and it is believed that those who die on this day are freed from the rounds of birth and death; they directly reach Vaikunta, the abode of Lord Vishnu. It is for this reason that the Great King Bismarck waited long on his bed of arrows, to leave his last breath.

On Vaikunta Ekadashi day devotees fast the whole day, observe vigil the whole night, and do 'Japa' (meditation) and 'Hari Kirtan' (devotional songs). Some do not take even a drop of water. Those who are unable to fast completely can take some light fruit and milk.

No rice should be taken

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There are even variations on the "traditional" Christmas, such as Las Posadas. With so many cultures celebrating so many different holidays in different ways, December is possibly one of the most culturally diverse months of the year.

Burning the Devil in Guatemala



Clean out your house, and bring luck into the new year by burning the devil.

Quema Del Diablo, or "burning of the devil," is a blend of religious traditions and ancient superstitions initiated by Franciscan priests in Guatemala City in 1935. Based on the notion that the devil lurked between old, unused household goods, villagers would gather dry branches and piles of household discards, and at 6 pm on December 7th, the eve of the Immaculate Conception, they would set them ablaze. Pre-festivities have grown to include men dressed as devils chasing children down the streets. Burning effigies of the devil is said to rid the cities, towns, and homes of bad luck (devil spirits), making room for prosperity in the New Year. Festivities often carry on for a week, ending on December 14th.



December 20th Begins an Eight Day Festival of Rededication

Chanukkah, the Jewish festival of rededication, also known as the festival of lights, is an eight day festival beginning on the 25th day of the Jewish month of Kislev. Chanukkah is

on Ekadashi days. It is said that the sweat that fell down from the head of Brahma assumed the form of a demon, and he asked the Lord to provide him an abode to dwell.



Lord Vishnu

Brahma said to the demon to go and dwell in the rice particles eaten by men on Ekadashi day and become worms in their stomach. For this reason rice is prohibited on Ekadashi.

If one observes the Ekadashi fast regularly, Lord Hari is propitiated. All sins are destroyed, and the mind is purified. Devotion gradually develops and love for God becomes intense. Orthodox people in South India observe complete fasting and vigil even on ordinary Ekadashi Days. For the devotees of Lord Vishnu, every Ekadashi is a very sacred day.



The Feast of Our Lady of Guadalupe, patron saint of the Americas, is December 12th.

one of the best known Jewish holidays, not because of any great religious significance, but because of its proximity to Christmas. Many non-Jews (and converts) think of this holiday as the Jewish Christmas, adopting many of the Christmas customs, such as elaborate gift-giving and decoration. It is ironic that this holiday, which has its roots in revolution against assimilation and suppression of the Jewish religion, has become the most assimilated and secular holiday on the Jewish calendar.

The story of Chanukkah begins during the time of Alexander the Great. Alexander had conquered Syria, Egypt and Palestine, but allowed for the lands under his reign to continue observing their own religions and retain a certain degree of autonomy. Under this benevolent rule, many Jews assimilated much of the Greek culture, including the language, customs and dress of the Greeks, in the same way that Jews in America blend into the secular American society.



Antiochus IV, as pictured on a bronze coin

More than a century later, Antiochus IV was in control of the region, and began to oppress the Jews severely, placing a Greek priest in the Temple, massacring Jews, and prohibiting the practice of the Jewish religion. After he desecrated the Temple with a sacrifice of a non-kosher animal, several groups of Jews banded together and revolted against both the assimilation of the Hellenistic Jews and oppression by the Greek government. The revolution succeeded and the Temple was rededicated.

According to tradition, at the time of the rededication of the Temple, there was very little oil left that had not been defiled by the Greek. Oil was needed for the menorah in the Temple, which was supposed to burn throughout the night, every night. There was only enough to burn for one day, but miraculously, it burned for eight days, the time needed to prepare a fresh supply of oil for the menorah. An eight day

A special day to Hispanic Catholics, especially those of Mexican descent, is the Feast of Our Lady of Guadalupe (December 12). Missionaries who first came to Mexico with the conquistadors had little success in the beginning. After nearly a generation, only a few hundred Native Mexicans had converted to the Christian faith. Whether they did not understand what the missionaries had to offer or they resented these people who made them slaves, Christianity was not popular amongst the native people.

In 1531, miracles began to happen. Jesus' own mother appeared to an Indian. Mary appeared to Juan Diego as a beautiful Aztec princess speaking to him in his own Aztec language. The signs that followed --of the roses (blooming in winter), of an uncle cured of a deadly illness, and the beautiful image on Juan's mantle (where he had carried the roses)--convinced the people there was something to be considered in Christianity. Within a short time, six million Native Mexicans had been baptized as Christians.



Kwanzaa:
Celebrating
African-American
Struggles and
Rich Cultural
Heritage

Founded in 1966 by Dr. Maulana Karenga, the holiday last for seven days beginning on December 26th. It binds the African harvest customs and social history of African-Americans. The name Kwanzaa is derived from the East African Swahili phrase "Mantunde ya kwanza" which means "the first fruits." The second "a" was added to give the name seven letters, corresponding to the seven symbols, the seven principles and seven days of Kwanzaa.

festival was declared to commemorate this miracle (not the revolution).

The only religious observance related to this holiday is the lighting of the candles. The candles are arranged in a menorah that hold nine candles: one for each night, plus a shammas (servant) at a different height. The first candle is placed on the far right, and the subsequent candles are added, from right to left (but lit left to right). The candles are allowed to burn out on their own after a minimum of 1/2 hour, and on the eighth night, all nine candles are lit.



It is also traditional to eat fried foods at this time because of the significance of oil to the holiday, often including latkes (pronounced "lot-kuhs" or "lot-keys" or "potato pancake"). While gift-giving is not a traditional part of the holiday, many Jews give gifts to their children (so as to ease the jealousy toward their Christian friends), though it is very unusual for them to give Chanukkah gifts to anyone else. Another tradition of the holiday is playing dreidel, a gambling game played with coins. You can play an online version of dreidel by clicking on the picture below.



Las Posadas - a colorful Hispanic tradition

The Seven Principles

- **umoha** (oo-MO-jah) - *unity* - "a commitment to the practice of togetherness, both within the family and in our communities"
- **kujichagulia** (koo-jee-cha-goo-LEE-ah) - *self determination* - "the interest of developing and patterning our lives and images after ourselves instead of having it done for us"
- **ujima** (oo-JEE-mah) - *collective work and responsibility* - "working together on matters of common interest"
- **ujamma** (oo-JAH-mah) - *cooperative economics* -
the habit of sharing our wealth and resources"
- **nia** (NEE-ah): purpose - "building and developing our national community"
- **kuumba** (koo-OOM-bah) - *creativity* - "to inspire ourselves to keep developing new ways of expressing our music and art as well as being creative in our work and industrial pursuits"
- **imani** (ee-MAH-nee) - *faith* - "believing in ourselves as a people"



The Seven Symbols:

- **mkeka** (mm-KEH-ah) a woven mat, symbolic of black history, typically the other symbols are placed on the mkeka

In Mexico, Christmas is an important holiday season with strong traditions. One of the most colorful traditions is the posada. The posada celebration commemorates Mary and Joseph's cold and difficult journey from Nazareth to Bethlehem in search of shelter.

"Posada" in Spanish, simply means lodging or shelter. Nowadays, the posada has evolved into a religious and social celebration, paying a festive homage to the journey.



A small child dressed as an angel leads the procession of children from house to house, as they beg for shelter. Usually there are two children dressed as Mary and Joseph followed by boys and girls dressed in silver and gold. Musicians and adults bring up the rear. As the children move from house to house, they sing a song asking the owner of the house for shelter for the night, and are refused shelter until the last house, where they are welcomed. The happy end to the posada is the pinata, traditionally made in the shape of a star, and filled with candy, toys and sometimes, money.

Santa Claus/St. Nicholas: a December staple

- **mazao** (mah-ZAH-oh) fruits and vegetables symbolic of the harvest
- **kinara** (kee-NAH-rah) a candleholder, symbolic of the history and people who died in Africa many years ago
- **mishumaa saba** (mee-SHOO-mah SAH-bah) the seven candles, representing the seven principles of Kwanzaa (three red candles are on the left of the kinara representing struggle; the middle candle is black, representing all people; and the three green candles on the right represent the future)
- **muhindi** (moo-HIN-dee) ears of corn, representing children, on ear of corn for each child in the family
- **kikombe cha umoja** (kee-KOH-beh chah oo-MOH-jah) the unity cup, symbolic of staying together
- **zawadi** (zah-WAH-dee) gifts, given to children as rewards for promises kept during the year (these are not mandatory, and are only given if deserved)

Celebrate the Emperor Akihito's Birthday on December 23rd.

Banzai Denke Tenou Heika!

(roughly translates to *VERY Happy Birthday to the Emperor*)

Emperor Akihito will be 70 this year. Each year in Japan, the Imperial Palace opens to foreigners and natives alike to celebrate the world's longest lasting Emperorship.



Other Japanese celebrations in December include:

Popularized by the Dutch Protestants of New Amsterdam (New York) who had converted the popish saint into a Nordic magician (Santa Claus = Sint Klaes = Saint Nicholas) and introduced into America by Bret Harte, St. Nicholas' feast day is December 8th. The patron saint of bakers, pawnbrokers, sailors, and children, St. Nicholas was known for his devotion to his faith, and unwavering charity. His patronage of children can be traced to the legend of the three daughters.



A citizen of Patra had lost all his money, and had to support three daughters, who would not find husbands because of their poverty; so the wretched man was going to give them over to prostitution. This came to the ears of Nicholas, who thereupon took a bag of gold and, under the cover of darkness threw it in at the open window of the man's house. Here was a dowry for the eldest girl, and she was soon duly married. At intervals Nicholas did the same for the second and third; the last time the father was on the watch, recognized his benefactor and overwhelmed him with his gratitude.

[Printable Calendar of MCGS & Related Texas State University-San Marcos Events](#)

December 8: Hari-Kuyo: the Japanese Festival of the Broken Needles, carried on since 400 AD.

Anyone who sews can participate. A shrine is made for the needles containing offerings of food, scissors and thimbles. Broken and bent needles are inserted into a pan of tofu, with a special prayer thanking it for its fine service over the year. The needles find their final resting place at sea, as devotees everywhere wrap their tofu in paper and launch them out into the ocean.



December 9 & 10: Diakon Daki:

Japanese radishes are cooked for visitors to the Ryotokuji Temple in Kyoto. The tradition dates back to when local villages served radishes to the founder of Pure Land Buddhism when he came to the Temple.

December 31: O-misuka: people usually eat a special kind of soba (noodles) called toshi-koshi-soba and think about the good year that has just finished.



Winter Solstice: a long standing celebration across the world

Winter solstice is overlaid with many holidays, and has spread across the globe. Native Americans had winter solstice rites, often lasting several days. In Iran, there is the observance of Yalda, in which families kept vigil thorough the night and fires burned brightly to help the sun (and Goodness) battle darkness (thought evil). In China, though the calendar is based on the moon, the day of winter solstice is called Dong-Zhi, "the arrival of winter." Winter Solstice, or Yule, was also a great time of celebration amongst the Druids in Europe, and

continues with observances amongst the Wiccan and neo-pagans in America.



Have a safe and happy break, no matter what holiday you may be celebrating!



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