

# Multicultural Holidays



## Diwali or Dipawali (India)

It is a five-day festival of lights usually celebrated in the fall (exact dates depend on the moon cycle). This year (2022), Diwali started on October 24. It is India's biggest and most important holiday of the year. The festival gets its name from the row (*avali*) of clay lamps (*deepa*) that Indians light outside their homes to symbolize the inner light that protects from spiritual darkness. This festival is as important to Hindus as the Christmas holiday is to Christians. Over the centuries, Diwali has become a national festival that's also enjoyed by non-Hindu communities. For instance, in Jainism, Diwali marks the nirvana, or spiritual awakening, of Lord Mahavira on October 15, 527 B.C.; in Sikhism, it honors the day that Guru Hargobind Ji, the Sixth Sikh Guru, was freed from imprisonment. Buddhists in India celebrate Diwali as well.

On the second day of the festival, people decorate their homes with clay lamps and create design patterns called *rangoli* on the floor using colored powders or sand.

The third day is the main day of the festival. On this day, families gather together for Lakshmi puja, a prayer to Goddess Lakshmi, followed by mouth-watering feasts and firework festivities.

## Bodhi Day (Buddhist)

This commemorates the exact moment of Buddha's awakening (under the peepal tree which is now known as Bodhi). It has since become a celebration of enlightenment and a day for remembrance, meditation and chanting. The exact date of celebration varies: Theravada Buddhists depend on the lunar calendar, Mahayana Buddhists go by the Chinese lunar calendar, while Japanese Bodhi Day is fixed on December 8 every year (Bodhi Day, Thought Co.). At the start of Bodhi day, people decorate a Ficus tree with multi-colored lights strung with beads. This symbolizes the varied paths to Nirvana (their ultimate state/goal) and signifies that all things are united.

## Hanukkah (Jewish)

Also known as the Festival of Lights, Hanukkah will be celebrated from the evening of December 18 to the evening of December 26 in 2022. It commemorates the rededication and purification of the Temple by the Maccabees after the Jews' revolt against the oppression of the Seleucid Empire (Greek-Syrians) in 164 BCE, who had amongst other things defiled the Temple during their rule over the Holy Land. The most well-known symbol of this celebration is the menorah, which is a type of candelabra. One candle is lit at sundown each night during Hanukkah. During the battle, the Temple's candelabrum burned for eight days and nights using an amount of oil meant to last for a single day.

In addition to candles and prayers, celebrations include playing the game of dreidel and eating foods fried in oil, including latkes (potato pancakes) and sufganiyot (jelly doughnuts). Children traditionally received small gifts during Chanukah such as a few coins or fruits and nuts, for winning the dreidel game, though gift-giving increased exponentially in modern U.S. culture given the proximity to Christmas on the Gregorian calendar and can be a major or minor gift giving holiday depending on the household.

The word Hanukkah is transliterated in many different ways into English, including Chanukah, Hanukah, Hanuka, Chanike, and many other variations. The first syllable is pronounced with a guttural "kh" sound (like Bach), not an H as in hair or a CH as in chair. People who use Spanish say Janucá, and the J makes an H sound.

Thematically, Hanukkah teaches us never to be afraid to stand up for what is right, even when the odds are incredibly daunting; celebrates freedom of religion; and just as we increase the number of candles we light each day, increase the light we send out into the darkness. A little light goes a long way.

Traditional greetings include “Hanukah sameach” (Hebrew and Yiddish) and “Hanukah alegre” (Ladino). For people who speak Spanish, the greeting is “¡Feliz Janucá!”

## Winter Solstice (various cultures/religions)

Many cultures all over the world celebrated (and continue to celebrate) winter solstice even before Christmas came to be. In fact, the term Yule was derived from an old European holiday held at the start of the solar year known as the celebration of Light and the Rebirth of the Sun. Other winter solstice celebrations include:

- **Feast of Juul (Scandinavian)** – A pre-Christian festival celebrated in December. On this day, a yule log is burned on the hearth in honor of the Scandinavian god, Thor.
- **Yalda (Persia/Iran)** – Also called Shab –e-Yalda, it marks the last day of the Persian month of Azar during ancient times. It commemorates the victory of light over dark and the birth of the sun god Mithra.
- **Saturnalia (ancient Roman)** – Aside from winter solstice, Saturnalia celebrates the end of the planting season. It was marked by games, feasts and gift-giving for several days.
- **St. Lucia’s Day (Scandinavian)** – On this day, girls dress up in white gowns with red sashes and wreaths of candles on their heads to honor the saint. It is also called the festival of lights as people light up fires to ward off spirits at night.
- **Dong Zhi (Chinese)** – Dong Zhi celebrates the end of harvest and the arrival of winter. In the traditional Chinese celestial calendar, this falls between the 21st and 23rd of December. Families gather to enjoy a feast in celebration. Depending on the region, people usually eat dumplings or sticky rice balls on that day.
- **Gody (Poland)** – This is the tradition of showing forgiveness and sharing food. It was part of pre-Christian winter solstice celebrations.
- **Chaomos (Kalasha, Pakistan)** – Kalasha or Kalash Kafir people celebrate for at least seven days. It involves ritual baths for purification, singing and chanting, a torchlight procession, dancing, bonfires, and feasts.
- **St. Thomas Day/Sun God festival (Guatemala)** – December 21 is the feast day of St. Thomas the Apostle. Mayans also hold a festival honoring the sun god on this day. It is celebrated with fanfare including colorful parades and the daring flying pole dance in Peru.
- **Yule (Germanic)** - Yule is a midwinter festival celebrated by Germanic people, a celebration to the Norse God, Odin and a Pagan holiday called Modraniht. It revolves around thanking the Gods and Goddesses for what you have as well as celebrating nature and its changes. Yule is celebrated for twelve days, starting on the Winter Solstice. Yule is the celebration of light and the rebirth of the sun as this day marks the longest day when the hours of daylight are at the least, where the Goddess once again becomes the Great Mother and gives birth to the new Sun King.

## Kwanzaa (African)

Kwanzaa is not a religious holiday but a celebration of African heritage and culture. It is a seven-day celebration from December 26 to January 1 that features the lighting of the kinara each day, similar to the lighting of the menorah during Hanukkah. Each day is represented by a principle of Kwanzaa: 1st – umoja (unity), 2nd – kujichagulia (self-determination), 3rd – ujima (collective work and responsibility), 4th – ujamaa (cooperative economics), 5th – nia (purpose), 6th – kuumba (creativity), and 7th – imani (faith). If you want to greet a person celebrating this holiday, you say “Habari gani” (Swahili). They would reply with the principle for that day.

## Christmas (Christian)

It is a Christian festival celebrating the birth of Jesus. The English term Christmas (“mass on Christ’s day”) is of fairly recent origin. The corresponding terms in other languages—Navidad in Spanish, Natale in Italian, Noël in French—all probably denote nativity. The German word Weihnachten denotes “hallowed night.” Christmas is celebrated on December 25, although several countries hold their biggest celebrations on Christmas Eve.

## New Year’s (secular)

New Year’s eve, December 31, marks the last day in the Gregorian calendar. It is a night of merry-making marked with fireworks, parties, and feasts. Many people also observe rituals that are thought to give them good luck and help them start an auspicious year like serving certain food to bring wealth (black-eyed peas in the southern part of the US or seven round fruits in Asian countries), wearing polka-dots (to attract wealth), and making noise with fireworks to drive bad spirits away.

## Three King’s Day (Christian)

Also known as Epiphany, this marks the twelfth day of Christmas when the Three Wise Men visited the Christ child and brought him gifts. In Hispanic cultures, this is a day of gift-giving and other festivities. Many countries in Latin America, the Caribbean and Spain celebrate this on January 6.

## Orthodox Christmas

Members of the Orthodox Church celebrate Jesus’ birth a week after December 25th and after all our usual celebrations have died down. They celebrate Christmas on January 7th or near this date. Why? It’s a difference in calendars. Those who celebrate Christmas on December 25th are using the Gregorian calendar introduced in 1582. Those who were still using the Julian calendar (much of the Soviet Bloc and the Middle East) celebrated Christmas 13 days later. While most of these countries now follow the Gregorian calendar, many still observe religious holidays on the Julian dates. Traditionally, Orthodox Christians begin with a 40-day period of fasting before Christmas. After the Christmas eve mass, families celebrate with feasts, joyful caroling, and other traditions. Ukrainian and Russian Orthodox faiths prepare 12 traditional dishes representing Christ’s apostles. Ukrainian households also throw a spoonful of Kutia (a traditional dish made of wheat, honey and poppy seeds) up in the air to know what the year has in store for them. The more Kutia is stuck to the walls or ceiling, the more prosperous the year would be.

## Chinese New Year (Chinese)

Chinese New Year marks the end of winter and the start of spring. It usually falls between January 21 and February 20 based on the lunar calendar (February 1 in 2022 and January 22 in 2023). Families gather to enjoy a feast on Chinese New Year’s Eve, beginning the celebration on the New Moon and ending on the Full Moon 15 days later. People indulge in feasts, watch dragon and lion dances and parades, light fireworks, and distribute luck money in red envelopes to children. This is one of the most important holidays among the Chinese people.

## Tết (Vietnamese New Year)

Short for Tết Nguyên Đán, Spring Festival, Lunar New Year, or Vietnamese Lunar New Year is one of the most important celebrations in Vietnamese culture. Tết celebrates the arrival of spring based on the Vietnamese calendar, which usually has the date on January or February in the Gregorian calendar. Vietnamese people usually return to their families during Tết. Some return to worship at the family altar or visit the graves of their ancestors in their homeland. They also clear up the graves of their families as a sign of respect. Although Tết is a national holiday among all Vietnamese, each region and religion has its own customs. These celebrations can last from 4 days up to the entire week.

\*Is Vietnamese New Year the same as Chinese New Year?

Although it has some similarities with Chinese New Year typically happen during the same time, Tết is Vietnam's unique celebration. It should not be considered that Vietnamese culture celebrate Chinese New Year. They happen at the same time but Vietnamese people would prefer calling it Tết or Lunar New Year rather than Chinese New Year.

## Seollal (Korean New Year)

Seollal is a holiday and celebration which marks the first day of the Korean Lunar Calendar. The celebration usually lasts three days: the day before New Year, New Year itself, and the day after New Year. It's a festive occasion when Koreans take time to remember their heritage. If possible, they return to their hometowns to visit their parents and relatives. Traditionally, families gather from all over Korea at the house of their oldest male relative to pay their respects to both ancestors and elders. The centerpiece of the holiday is the ritual of ancestor worship. Still, there are other activities, including eating together, playing games, and "Sebae," where children bow to their elders and receive small gifts of money.

Korean New Year occurs sometime in January or February, depending on the year. In 2023, it will be celebrated on January 22—although the celebrations also include January 21 and 23.

\*Is Korean New Year the same as Chinese New Year?

The two holidays are not the same, although they typically occur at the same time.

## Ramadan (Muslim)

Ramadan is considered one of the holiest months of the year for Muslims. In Ramadan, Muslims commemorate the revelation of the Qur'an, and fast from food and drink during the sunlit hours as a means of drawing closer to God and cultivating self-control, gratitude, and compassion for those less fortunate. Ramadan is a month of intense spiritual rejuvenation with a heightened focus on devotion, during which Muslims spend extra time reading the Qur'an and performing special prayers. Ramadan is the 9th month of the Islamic calendar, which is based on a 12-month lunar year of approximately 354 days. It was observed from the evening of April 1 to May 1 in 2022. The next time it will be in December to January will be in 2030.

## Tết Trung Thu - Mid-Autumn Festival (Vietnamese)

Tết Trung Thu or Mid-autumn Festival, is also known in Vietnam as the "Children's Festival". It is celebrated on the 15th day of Lunar August, when the moon shines the brightest. In the old time, the celebration of the harvest is an important part of Tết Trung Thu, as most Vietnamese hundreds/thousands years ago lived in rural areas and worked as farmers. Tết Trung Thu marks a joyous occasion when the work is finished and there's time to spend with loved ones. Traditions are people eating mooncakes and children play with lanterns during the moon lit nights.