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CIR's Corner

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Hello everyone! "CIR's Corner" is my monthly article about international exchange and cultures around the world. I will introduce a variety of interesting international topics.

This Month's Topic: Happy Holidays!

Various holidays around the world are celebrated in December. This month, I'll introduce a few.

December Solstice

Because of Earth's approximate 23% axial tilt, the December solstice is the longest night of the year for the Northern Hemisphere. It generally occurs on December 21 or 22. It has been an important time for many cultures from ages ago, and there are many festivals associated with it. Some ruins were even built to celebrate it. For example, Stonehenge, a World Heritage Site located in England, was built to perfectly align with sunset of the December solstice.



Left: Stonehenge at sunset. Right: Saturnalia

Almost all modern Christmas traditions are based on ancient December solstice celebrations. For example, the Romans celebrated a holiday called

Saturnalia around the time of the December solstice. It was a huge festival with feasting, drinking, and exchanging presents. It is rumored that in order to get more converts to Christianity, in the 4th century, Pope Julius I decided that Jesus Christ's birthday would be celebrated on December 25, coinciding with Saturnalia (Christ's actual birthday is unknown). Also, the Germanic peoples of Central Europe and Scandinavia celebrated a holiday called Yule. They burned a large log, sacrificed a boar and consumed its meat, and visited neighbors to sing songs. Eventually, "Yule" became another name for Christmas, and the "Yule log," "Yule ham," and "Yuletide carols" are still around today. France's Christmas cake, *Bûche de Noël*, is made in the image of a Yule log.

I've celebrated the December solstice numerous times. My friend, an Irish American, hosted large bonfire parties in his yard every year. December solstice bonfires are a Celtic tradition.



Yule log in the fireplace



Bûche de Noël



A Swedish Yule ham

Hanukkah



Menorah

Hanukkah, also known as “the festival of light,” is celebrated by Jewish people all over the world. The dates are different every year, but it’s always eight days between late November and December. This year’s Hanukkah will be

from December 18 to December 26.

The story of Hanukkah has no relation to the story of Christmas. Around 2200 years ago, Judea was ruled by Greece, and Judaism was banned. The Greeks turned the Temple in Jerusalem into a house of worship for Zeus. However, a group of guerillas led by Judah Maccabee revolted and reclaimed their temple. In order to purify it, they needed to light the *menorah*, but they only had a small amount of olive oil for fuel. The fuel should have only lasted for one day, but it ended up burning for eight days. Because of this miracle, Hanukkah is celebrated for eight days.

During Hanukkah, one candle on the *menorah* is lit each night after sunset. Fried foods such as *latkes* (potato pancakes) and *sufganiyot* (jelly donuts) are

eaten to symbolize the oil used for fuel. Children are given Hanukkah *gelt*, which are coin-shaped chocolates. People play with a wooden top called a *dreidel*. And every night, families exchange gifts.



Adam Sandler singing “The Hanukkah Song”

While I am not Jewish, my great-great-grandfather was a Sephardic Jew living in Morocco who married an English woman and converted to Christianity. Maybe that’s why my dad sometimes gave me Hanukkah *gelt*? Also, I was a big fan of Jewish comedian Adam Sandler in the 90s, so his famous song, “The Hanukkah Song,” has remained a staple of my holiday playlist through the years. It’s a novelty song written to cheer up Jewish children by listing many Jewish celebrities with whom they can relate.



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①latkes ②sufganiyot ③Hanukkah gelt ④dreidel

A menorah and a yarmulke

Kwanzaa

Kwanzaa is a holiday to celebrate African-American culture lasting from December 26 to January 1. It was created in 1966 by activist and professor of African studies, Dr. Maulana Karenga. The protests and riots which marked the civil rights movement of the 1960s made Dr. Karenga think that Black Americans needed a holiday to unite them. In the Swahili language, Kwanzaa means “first fruits.” The holiday is based on various African harvest festivals which take place around the December solstice.



Left: A woman wearing a traditional West African garment lights a *kinara*
Right: Various fruits and vegetables displayed on the Kwanzaa mat

There are seven principles of Kwanzaa, and each day of the festival is dedicated to one.

1. *Umoja* (Unity): “To strive for and to maintain unity in the family and community.”
2. *Kujichagulia* (Self-determination): “To define and name ourselves, as well as to create and speak for ourselves.”
3. *Ujima* (Collective work and responsibility): “To build and maintain our community together and make our brothers' and sisters' problems our problems and to solve them together.”
4. *Ujamaa* (Cooperative economics): “To build and maintain our own stores, shops, and other businesses and to profit from them together.”
5. *Nia* (Purpose): “To make our collective vocation the building and developing of our community in order to restore our people to their traditional greatness.”
6. *Kuumba* (Creativity): “To do always as much as we can, in the way we can, in order to leave our community more beautiful and beneficial than we inherited it.”

7. *Imani* (Faith): “To believe with all our hearts in our people, our parents, our teachers, our leaders, and the righteousness and victory of our struggle.”



Corn, a *kinara*, Africa in Kwanzaa colors, and a *kikombe cha umoja* (unity cup), which adults use to ceremoniously share wine

During Kwanzaa, one candle on the *kinara* candleholder is lit each night. The seven candles represent the seven principles. There is a black candle in the center, with three red and three green candles on either side. Black represents African skin color, red represents the blood that has been shed in their struggle, and green represents the rich natural resources of Africa and hope for the future. In addition to lighting the *kinara*, families enjoy a feast together and exchange presents.

Dr. Karenga initially introduced Kwanzaa as a substitute for Christmas celebrated by white people, but since a large percentage of African Americans are also Christians, most people who celebrate Kwanzaa celebrate Christmas as well. Also, one does not have to be black to celebrate Kwanzaa. When I was a child, children of all races learned about Kwanzaa and made Kwanzaa decorations in school.



Dr. Maulana Karenga (center) celebrating Kwanzaa

Christmas

Japanese people are already familiar with Christmas. Here in Japan, Christmas is secular and focuses on Santa Claus and presents, but how is Christmas celebrated in other countries? I asked Assistant Language Teachers (ALTs) of various nationalities about the customs in their home countries, and here's what they said.

<p>USA</p> 	<p>A recent Christmas trend in America is “Elf on the Shelf.” The elf works for Santa. He watches the children and reports whether they are being “naughty or nice.” Parents hide the elf in their home, and children enjoy searching for him every morning leading up to Christmas. I think it's a bit creepy to be watched by an elf, so I don't practice this custom.</p>	
<p>Scotland</p> 	<p>Many people go to church on Christmas Eve. For dinner, people have chicken or turkey. A traditional dessert is Christmas pudding made with dried fruits and alcohol, but a lot of people just eat a dessert they enjoy, such as chocolate cake and ice cream. Sending Christmas cards is another important custom. Some people even send themselves fake cards in order to appear more popular than they actually are.</p>	
<p>Lithuania</p> 	<p>In Lithuania, the family eats a big meal on Christmas Eve. The dining table is covered with 12 different dishes, but they must not contain any meat or dairy products. Only vegetables, grains, rye bread, honey, and other ingredients are permitted. However, fish is acceptable. Each dish has to be tasted by everyone at the table.</p>	
<p>Australia</p> 	<p>Because Christmas is HOT in Australia, many families go to the beach and enjoy barbeques. People eat chicken and ham, but prawns (shrimp) are another popular food. The traditional dessert is <i>pavlova</i>, which is meringue topped with whipped cream and fruit. Many families watch old movies together, as well as the cricket match between sports rivals Australia and England.</p>	
<p>India</p> 	<p>Hinduism is the most followed religion, but there are also many Christians in some regions. For example, the northeastern state of Manipur is home to many, and they attend worship service on Christmas Eve as well as at midnight. There are also morning and evening worship services on Christmas Day. People celebrate with games, carols, dancing, skits, and other entertainment, and festivities can last until late at night.</p>	
<p>Mexico</p> 	<p>Christmas celebrations start with Posadas on December 16. Each night, a different family hosts “pilgrims” dressed as Mary and Joseph. This represents their journey to Bethlehem and their search for shelter on the night of Jesus Christ's birth. There are also fireworks, candles, and a <i>piñata</i>. <i>Tamales</i>, a food made from corn dough filled with meat and spices and steamed in a corn husk, are traditionally eaten.</p>	



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