



December Celebrations Around the World

December 2011 Issue No. 19



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Upcoming Learning Opportunities

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Kwanzaa adoptionworld.org

Kwanzaa is a unique African American celebration with focus on the traditional African values of family, community responsibility, commerce, and self-improvement. Kwanzaa is neither political nor religious and despite some misconceptions, is not a substitute for Christmas. It is simply a time of reaffirming African-American people, their ancestors and culture. Kwanzaa, which means "first fruits of the harvest" in the African language Kiswahili, has gained tremendous acceptance. Since its founding in 1966 by Dr. Maulana Karenga, Kwanzaa has come to be observed by more than 13 million people worldwide, as reported by the New York Times. Celebrated from December 26th to January 1st, it is based on Nguzo Saba (seven guiding principles), one for each day of the observance:

Umojo (Unity) stresses the importance of togetherness for the family and the community, which is reflected in the African saying, "I am We," or "I am because We are."

Kujichagulia (Self-Determination) requires that we define our common interests and make decisions that are in the best interest of our family and community.

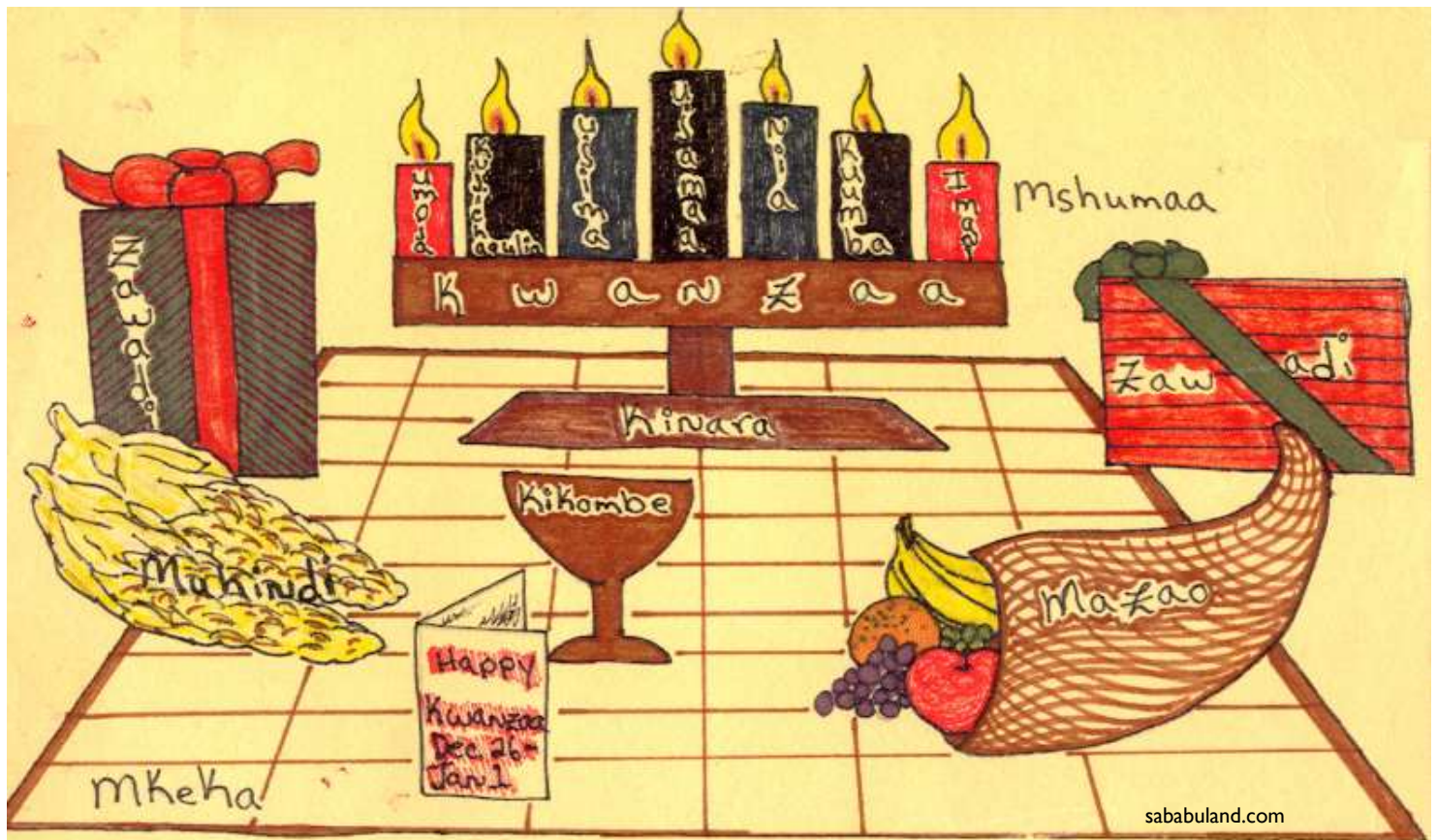
Ujima (Collective Work and Responsibility) reminds us of our obligation to the past, present and future, and that we have a role to play in the community, society, and world.

Ujamaa (Cooperative economics) emphasizes our collective economic strength and encourages us to meet common needs through mutual support.

Nia (Purpose) encourages us to look within ourselves and to set personal goals that are beneficial to the community.

Kuumba (Creativity) makes use of our creative energies to build and maintain a strong and vibrant community.

Imani (Faith) focuses on honoring the best of our traditions, draws upon the best in ourselves, and helps us strive for a higher level of life for humankind, by affirming our self-worth and confidence in our ability to succeed and triumph in righteous struggle.



CELEBRATING KWANZAA

As it is always better to get an early start, I suggest that you begin the first week in December by making a check list for the following items: A Kinara (candle holder); Mkeka (placemat preferably made of straw); Mazao (crops, i.e., fruits and vegetables); Vibunzi (ears of corn to reflect the number of children in the household); Kikombe cha umoja (communal unity cup); Mishumaa saba (sevendead candles, one black, three red, and three green); and Zawadi (gifts that are enriching).

It is important that the Kinara not be confused with the menorah. The Kinara holds seven candles to reflect the seven principles which are the foundation of Kwanzaa, while the menorah is a Jewish religious symbol that holds eight candles. If you don't have a Kinara and don't know where to get one, it is suggested that you use "kuumba" (creativity) and make one. A 2x4 or a piece of driftwood will do just fine, and screw-in candle holders can be purchased in most hardware stores. The Mkeka (place mat) shouldn't present a problem. While straw is suggested because it is traditional, cloth makes an adequate substitute. If cloth is used, one with an African print is preferred. The other symbols are easy to come by and warrant no further discussion other than to caution against placing the Mazao (crops) in a cornucopia which is Western. A plain straw basket or a bowl will do just fine. One last note, even households with no children should place a near of corn on the place mat to symbolize the African concept of social parenthood. All seven symbols are creatively placed on top of the place mat, i.e., the symbols should be attractively arranged as they form the Kwanzaa centerpiece. Even households with no children should place an ear of corn on the place mat to symbolize the African concept of social parenthood.

DECORATING THE HOME

The Kinara along with the other symbols of Kwanzaa should dominate the room, which should be given an African motif. This is easily achieved and shouldn't result in too much expense.

The colors of Kwanzaa are black, red and green. This should be kept in mind when decorating the home. Black, red and green streamers, balloons, cloth, flowers, and African prints can be hung tastefully around the room. Original art and sculpture may be displayed as well.

GIFTS

Kuumba (creativity) is greatly encouraged. Not only is Kuumba one of the seven principles, it also brings a sense of personal satisfaction and puts one squarely into the spirit of Kwanzaa. Therefore, those symbols that can be made, should be made. The giving of gifts during Kwanzaa should be affordable and of an educational or artistic nature. Gifts are usually exchanged between parents and children and traditionally given on January 1st, the last day of Kwanzaa. However, gift giving during Kwanzaa may occur at any time.

THE KWANZAA FEAST OR KARAMU

The Kwanzaa Karumu is traditionally held on December 31st (participants celebrating New Year's Eve, should plan their Karamu early in the evening). It is a very special event as it is the one Kwanzaa event that brings us closer to our African roots. The Karamu is a communal and cooperative effort. Ceremonies and cultural expressions are highly encouraged. It is important to decorate the place where the Karamu will be held, (e.g., home, community center, church) in an African motif that utilizes black, red, and green color scheme. A large Kwanzaa setting should dominate the room where the karamu will take place. A large Mkeka should be placed in the center of the floor where the food should be placed creatively and made accessible to all for self-service. Prior to and during the feast, an informative and entertaining program should be presented. Traditionally, the program involved welcoming, remembering, reassessment, recommitment and rejoicing, concluded by a farewell statement and a call for greater unity.



Feliz navidad: making merry in Mexico

Dale Hoyt Palfrey www.mexconnect.com

Dreaming of a white Christmas? If you're spending December in Mexico, forget it! The closest you'll come to frosty is to reminisce on winter wonderlands while sipping an icy margarita. You can expect the holiday season south of the border to be as warm and colorful as a tropical garden. And you'll discover a delightful array of seasonal traditions that make celebrating Navidad (Christmas) in Mexico a unique and unforgettable experience.

Las Posadas

Christmas festivities begin with Las Posadas, nine consecutive days of candlelight processions and lively parties starting December 16.

In villages and urban neighborhoods throughout Mexico youngsters gather each afternoon to reenact the holy family's quest for lodging in Bethlehem. The procession is headed by a diminutive Virgen María, often perched on a live burro, led by an equally tiny San José. They are followed by other children portraying angels, the Santos Reyes (Three Kings), and a host of pastores y pastoras (shepherds and shepherdesses), all usually decked out in colorful handmade costumes and carrying brightly decorated báculos (walking staffs) or faroles (paper lanterns).

The parade of Santos Peregrinos (Holy Pilgrims) stops at a designated house to sing a traditional litany (Link to words & music) by which the Holy Family requests shelter for the night and those waiting behind the closed door turn them away. They proceed to a second home where the scene is repeated. At the third stop the pilgrims are told that while there is no room in the posada (inn), they are welcome to take refuge in the stable. The doors are flung open and all are invited to enter.

This is an active way of teaching children the story of the Nativity, but the chief attraction is the merrymaking that follows, above all the

chance to engage in the ruthless smashing of piñatas and a mad scramble for the shower of fruits, sugar cane, peanuts and candies released from within.

Las Pastorelas

Pastorelas (Shepherds Plays) are staged throughout the holiday season by both amateur and professional groups. These traditional, often improvised, theatrical presentations date back to Mexico's Colonial period when Roman Catholic missionaries wooed converts and taught doctrine through dramatizations of Biblical stories.

The light, humor-filled Pastorelas tell of the shepherds' adoration of the Christ Child. First they are visited in the fields by an angel who announces the holy birth. As the shepherds attempt to follow the great star leading them to Bethlehem they are plagued by a series of evils and misadventures provoked by the Devil. But in the proverbial all's-well-that-ends-well finale, good triumphs over evil and the shepherd's reach their intended destination.

Nativity scenes, or El Nacimiento

In most Mexican homes the principal holiday adornment is el Nacimiento (Nativity scene). The focal point, naturally, is a stable where clay or plaster figurines of the Holy Family are sheltered. The scene may be further populated by an angel, Los Reyes Magos (the Magi), the ox and the ass, shepherds and their flocks, and assorted other people and livestock. It is not unusual to also find the forces of evil represented by a serpent and a grotesque Lucifer lurking in the shadows. The figures may be simply positioned in a bed of heno (Spanish moss), or scattered throughout an elaborate landscape.

A major masterpiece may occupy an entire room, often near the front of the house for convenient viewing by neighbors and passersby. The creation of the basic landscape begins with papel roca

The Three Kings: Los Reyes Magos



(paper painted in earth tones) draped over tables, taped onto boxes, crushed and shaped to form a multi-leveled, natural looking terrain that frequently includes a series of hills and dales, a cellophane waterfall, a mirror pond, artificial trees, cacti, palm trees, and little houses set to form an entire village scene. Colored sawdust and a variety of natural mosses may be spread out as ground cover before the addition of strings of Christmas lights and the assorted human and animal figures. The scene will not be completed until Christmas Eve when the newborn Baby Jesus is finally laid in the manger bed.

Nowadays a decorated Christmas tree may be incorporated in the Nacimiento or set up elsewhere in the home. As purchase of a natural pine represents a luxury commodity to most Mexican families, the typical arbolito (little tree) is often an artificial one, a bare branch cut from a copal tree (*Bursera microphylla*) or some type of shrub collected from the countryside.

Christmas Eve -- Noche Buena

Holiday festivities culminate on Noche Buena (Christmas Eve) with the celebration of a late-night Misa de Gallo (Rooster's Mass). Afterwards families head home for a traditional Christmas supper which may feature a simple fare of homemade tamales and atole (corn gruel) or other regional dishes. A more exotic feast might include bacalao a la vizcaína (Biscayan cod) and revoltijo de romeritos (wild greens in mole sauce). Roast turkey, ham or suckling pig are other popular menu items for those who can afford it. Ponche (a hot fruit punch), sidra (sparkling cider) or other spirits are served for the holiday brindis (toast). The evening is rounded out with the opening of gifts and, for the children, piñatas and luces de Belen (sparklers). As these happy family gatherings generally last into the wee hours, December 25th is set aside as a day to rest and enjoy that universal holiday bonus -- el recalentado (leftovers).

Incidentally, Santa Claus and the clatter of reindeer hooves on the roof do not generally figure in the scheme of Navidad. A Mexican youngster's holiday wishlist is directed instead to el Niño Dios (the Holy Child) for Christmas Eve and the Reyes Magos (Magi) for Three Kings Day.

Poinsettias: La Flor de Noche Buena

Its Latin name is *Euphorbia Pulcherrima*. Its Mexican monikers include the ancient Nahuatl term *Cuitlaxochitl* (star flower), along with Catarina (Catherine), Flor de Pastor (Shepherd's Flower) and, most commonly, Flor de Noche Buena (Christmas Eve Flower).

In the English-speaking world this illustrious holiday bloom is called the Poinsettia, named after Dr. Joel R. Poinsett, a U.S. diplomat who served as Minister to Mexico in the 1820's. Like many newcomers to Mexico, he was no doubt enthralled by the sight of the gargantuan shrubs covered in mid-winter with brilliant vermilion blossoms. After experimenting with various methods of propagation, he returned home to Charleston, South Carolina with enough cuttings to begin the cultivation of these stunning plants in northern climes.

The bright petals of the poinsettia are not really flowers, but bracts or leaves that surround the true blossom, a rather inconspicuous cluster of yellow florets. The bracts may be solid creamy white, salmon pink or scarlet, variegated or double blooms.

Among pre-Hispanic tribes of ancient Mexico, the *Cuitlaxochitl* was more than just a pretty face. The blood-red bracts were often placed on the chests of those suffering afflictions of the heart to help stimulate circulation. They were sometimes crushed to a pulp to be used as a poultice for the treatment of skin infections.

A note of good cheer to those more inclined to be couch potatoes than gardeners: Modern-day Mexicans enjoy still another form of Noche Buena-- a rich, dark, bock-like beer distributed only during the holiday season.

Los Santos Inocentes

December 28, Day of the Holy Innocents, is a religious commemoration of King Herod's ordering the slaughter of all male infants in his kingdom, intended to include the Christ Child. In Mexico it is celebrated as day akin to April Fool's, an occasion for jokes and pranks. The usual tactic is to approach a friend and ask to borrow cash or some object of value. If fooled by the ploy, the victim may be given a candy or silly gift in return, along with much joking and name calling. So beware or you may find yourself titled Fool Saint for a day!

The Three Kings: Los Reyes Magos

The Christmas season continues unabated in Mexico through Epiphany, which is called *Día de los Reyes* (Three Kings Day). Echoing the arrival in Bethlehem of Wise Men bearing gifts for the baby Jesus, children throughout Mexico anxiously await waking up

January 6 to find toys and gifts left by the Reyes Magos (Magi). In some regions it is customary to leave out shoes where treasures may be deposited by the visiting Wise Men.

A special treat served one this day is the Rosca de Reyes -- a crown-shaped sweet bread decorated with jewel-like candied

fruits. Tiny figures of babies are hidden in the dough before baking. There is much excitement as each partaker cuts his or her own slice, for whoever gets a piece containing a baby is obliged to host another party on or before Candlemas, February 2, when Mexico's holiday season finally comes to an end.



The Story of Chanukah

www.holidays.net

Chanukah 2011: Tuesday December 20 (sundown)

Every year between the end of November and the end of December, Jewish people around the world celebrate the holiday of Chanukah, the Festival of Lights. Chanukah begins on the 25th day of the Hebrew month of Kislev, but the starting date on the western calendar varies from year to year. The holiday celebrates the events which took place over 2,300 years ago in the land of Judea, which is now Israel

Long, long ago in a galaxy far, far away. WHOOPS! Wrong story! :-)
Long ago in the land of Judea there was a Syrian king, Antiochus. The king ordered the Jewish people to reject their God, their religion, their customs and their beliefs and to worship the Greek gods. There were some who did as they were told, but many refused. One who refused was Judah Maccabee.

Judah and his four brothers formed an army and chose as their name the word "Maccabee", which means hammer. After three years of fighting, the Maccabees were finally successful in driving the Syrians out of Israel and reclaimed the Temple in Jerusalem. The Maccabees

wanted to clean the building and to remove the hated Greek symbols and statues. On the 25th day of the month of Kislev, the job was finished and the temple was rededicated.

When Judah and his followers finished cleaning the temple, they wanted to light the eternal light, known as the N'er Tamid, which is present in every Jewish house of worship. Once lit, the oil lamp should never be extinguished.

Only a tiny jug of oil was found with only enough for a single day. The oil lamp was filled and lit. Then a miracle occurred as the tiny amount of oil stayed lit not for one day, but for eight days.

Jews celebrate Chanukah to mark the victory over the Syrians and the rededication of the Jerusalem Temple. The Festival of the Lights, Chanukah, lasts for eight days to commemorate the miracle of the oil. The word Chanukah means "rededication".

In America, families celebrate Chanukah at home. They give and receive gifts, decorate the house, entertain friends and family, eat special foods, and light the holiday menorah.



The History of Christmas

Alan Williams 2000 www.christmas-time.com

In the Western world, the birthday of Jesus Christ has been celebrated on December 25th since AD 354, replacing an earlier date of January 6th. The Christians had by then appropriated many pagan festivals and traditions of the season, that were practiced in many parts of the Middle East and Europe, as a means of stamping them out.

There were mid-winter festivals in ancient Babylon and Egypt, and Germanic fertility festivals also took place at this time. The birth of the ancient sun-god Attis in Phrygia was celebrated on December 25th, as was the birth of the Persian sun-god, Mithras. The Romans celebrated Saturnalia, a festival dedicated to Saturn, the god of peace and plenty, that ran from the 17th to 24th of December. Public gathering places were decorated with flowers, gifts and candles were exchanged and the population, slaves and masters alike, celebrated the occasion with great enthusiasm.

In Scandinavia, a period of festivities known as Yule contributed another impetus to celebration, as opposed to spirituality. As Winter ended the growing season, the opportunity of enjoying the Summer's bounty encouraged much feasting and merriment.

The Celtic culture of the British Isles revered all green plants, but particularly mistletoe and holly. These were important symbols of fertility and were used for decorating their homes and altars.

New Christmas customs appeared in the Middle Ages. The most prominent contribution was the carol, which by the 14th century had become associated with the religious observance of the birth of Christ.

In Italy, a tradition developed for re-enacting the birth of Christ and the construction of scenes of the nativity. This is said to have been introduced by Saint Francis as part of his efforts to bring spiritual knowledge to the laity.

Saints Days have also contributed to our Christmas celebrations. A prominent figure in today's Christmas is Saint Nicholas who for centuries has been honored on December 6th. He was one of the forerunners of Santa Claus.

Another popular ritual was the burning of the Yule Log, which is strongly embedded in the pagan worship of vegetation and fire, as well as being associated with magical and spiritual powers.

Celebrating Christmas has been controversial since its inception. Since numerous festivities found their roots in pagan practices, they were greatly frowned upon by conservatives within the Church. The feasting, gift-giving and frequent excesses presented a drastic contrast with the simplicity of the Nativity, and many people throughout the centuries and into the present, condemn such practices as being contrary to the true spirit of Christmas.

The earliest English reference to December 25th as Christmas Day did not come until 1043.

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Course Description

Genealogy is one of the fastest growing hobbies in the United States. According to some experts, nearly 75% of Americans are interested in discovering their family history. There are many reasons for this: some people are interested in learning more about their heritage, others want to preserve their family's history for future generations, while still others become involved as a means of spending time with older relatives. Whatever the reason, based on the number of books, web sites, and software programs devoted to this topic, there is widespread interest that continues to grow.

While taking on the task of researching your family tree can appear – and in many cases actually be – a daunting task, it is far from impossible. Thanks to the increasing availability of information online, many people can easily conduct a great deal of their research from the comforts of their own home. In this course, we will present tips and strategies for beginning the process of constructing your family tree. In addition to describing the various records and sources available for finding information, we will help you to understand some basic genealogy terms and tools. We will also discuss the steps that you can take to permanently preserve your family's records and history.



Or register here at

<http://longmontco.universalclass.com/register.htm>

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