Christmas Traditions from Around the World

What people remember and look forward to every holiday season isn’t the gifts and goodies. Folks eagerly anticipate the traditions and rituals that they celebrate together, especially those that go beyond the expected and become unique and special to a particular family or group of friends. Traditions that a family chooses or create themselves sustain for a long time and have a positive effect on them. Research shows that meaningful rituals contribute to family members’ psychological health and emotional well-being. Also, children reared in families that ascribe a lot of meaning to ritual tend to feel less anxiety, a greater sense of belonging to a group and a stronger sense of identity. The same goes for groups of friends that create traditions together.

In these challenging economic times 90 percent of Americans become more focused on celebrating family traditions as well as creating new ones. This holiday season more than ever, people are getting creative with how they will make the most of their holiday celebrations. We on the Diversity Committee would like to share some of the different ways people around the world celebrate the holidays.

Belgium:
They have a festival especially dedicated to children; which is Saint Nicholas (Sinter Klaas) on December 6th. The Great Patron of Schoolboys, The Saint accompanied by the devil asks children for a list of their good and bad deeds on December 4th. He comes back on December 6th and the good children are given sweets, toys and nuts in their shoes. The bad children are given twigs.

In Belgium, Christmas is reserved for adults: the streets are decorated and illuminated, as well as houses, windows, gardens and Christmas trees. Belgium seems to forget that it is a Catholic country and closes more and more churches, therefore, the Midnight Mass on December 24th usually happens at 6 or 8 PM. Belgians then eat with family and at 12 PM exchange gifts. Children usually receive a book or some clothes.

Christmas Day has little meaning but practicing Catholics go to church. Belgian people visit their family on January 1st. In the Belgian region of Ardennes, people celebrate December 31st and not Christmas.

France:
Christmas is dedicated to children. The streets and the houses are decorated several weeks in advance. French people have lots of Christmas customs: Christmas Markets, the Christmas tree, the Christmas Dinner, Père Noël (a legendary gift-giver identified with Father Christmas or Santa Claus in France), Christmas gifts, stories, songs, Christmas turkey, The Christmas Crib, the Yule Log, and so on. In the small region of Alsace, however, Saint Nicholas predominates on Santa Claus.

The Netherlands:
They organize their St. Nicholas (Sinter Klaas) festival: the old bearded man traveling by boat and accompanied by many aids, who distribute gifts to good children. Dutch people reserve the big gifts for Christmas.
Time because they profit from some great bargains after Sinter Klaas.

**Germany:**
Christmas in Germany lasts two days. On December 26th they visit their family and their friends. Christ-Kind offers gifts to the children on December 24th. Germany also has a Saint Nicholas festival on December 6th.

**Great Britain:**
Christmas is celebrated in England with enthusiasm. Children sing "Christmas Carols" in the streets and they eat the famous "Christmas Pudding" at the end of the Christmas Dinner. In England, Santa Claus fills the English children socks with gifts. British people also exchange greeting cards; which are a British creation.

**Spain:**
If Santa Claus has little importance in Spain (Magi or wise men distribute gifts to children on January 6th), Spanish people decorate the streets with lights during the month of December. The windows of the shops are filled with lots of gifts and Spanish celebrate the Christmas Evening with their family.

**Portugal:**
Christmas Eve is a holiday. The Portuguese attend the Christmas Midnight Mass; which is the "Missa Do Galo." There are not yet a lot of **Christmas trees in Portugal.** If there is no tree there is a "Wooden Christmas". It is a notable tree that each village offers young people. They must cut it and bring it highly decorated to be blessed on the steps of the church. It is set on fire December 24th to burn overnight.

**Italy:**
Christmas lasts three days, from December 24th till 26th. However, Christmas traditions vary from one region to another and, depending on the region it is Babo Natale (Father Christmas) or the "Gesu Bambino" (Little Jesus) who brings gifts on December 25th. The Italian Christmas dessert is "Panettone".

**Scandinavian Countries:**
During the Christmas Dinner, Scandinavian people reserve a place for the souls of the deceased members of their family. Once they finish eating, they read the bible. The whole family is singing Christmas songs and dance around the Christmas tree.

**Other European countries:**
In Romania, on December 24th, there is a Christmas candle burning until the morning of December 25th. In Russia, Christmas Day happens on January 7th, according to the Orthodox calendar. In Greece the Christmas period begins on Christmas Eve and ends at the Epiphany. Christmas is less important than Easter.

**USA:**
The Friday after Thanksgiving, Santa Claus is coming to announce the beginning of the Christmas shopping season. American people love to celebrate Christmas and set up a decorated Christmas tree in their home. Children hang empty socks on the fireplace and on Christmas morning they find them filled with candy and small toys. On December 26th many African Americans celebrate with Kwanzaa, a holiday that originated at the time of the civil rights movement in the 1960’s and is in commemoration of African heritage. Created
as a ritual for harvest time and using the language Swahili, Kwanzaa lasts a week during which participants gather with family and friends to exchange gifts and to light a series of black, red and green candles which symbolize the seven basic values of the African American family life that is unity, self-determination, collective work and responsibility, cooperative economics, purpose, creativity and faith.

**Canada:**
Houses, shops and streets are decorated with lights. Canadian people decorate their homes with a Christmas tree, a Christmas wrap, a Christmas Crib... After the "Midnight Mass" people have Christmas Eve with their family. Turkey and the Christmas log are the essential ingredients of a Canadian Christmas Dinner. They send greeting cards to their friends and family who live far away.

**South and Central America:**
Peruvian people have Christmas parties. Their Christmas season lasts a full week. Mexican people celebrate Christmas with Las Posadas (pilgrimages representing the path by Mary and Joseph). They celebrate the last Posada on the Christmas morning and then start the Christmas dinner. Guatemalan immigrants have imported their German customs and the Christmas tree is essential but the Christmas gifts are reserved to the children. Gift exchange for adults is on January 1st.

**Australia:**
Christmas happens during the summertime, so Australian people celebrate Christmas at the beach. People eat cold turkey and pudding.

**New Zealand:**
New Zealand people organize Christmas parades and people sing in the parks, there are few decorations. They also organize their famous "Christmas barbecue".

**Japan:**
Christmas has merely commercial significance in Japan. This festival represents Saint Nicholas and it is an opportunity to offer gifts to small children.

**China:**
Christmas is celebrated in Chinese cities. This festival was imported into this country by foreign missionaries. For the Chinese people who celebrate it, Christmas is a religious event.

**A couple final quotes about Christmas:**

"My idea of Christmas, whether old-fashioned or modern, is very simple: loving others. Come to think of it, why do we have to wait for Christmas to do that?" Bob Hope

"Christmas is not a time nor a season, but a state of mind. To cherish peace and goodwill, to be plenteous in mercy, is to have the real spirit of Christmas." Calvin Coolidge

"Christmas is most truly Christmas when we celebrate it by giving the light of love to those who need it most." Ruth Carter Stapleton
From the Diversity Committee we bring you “Merry Christmas” in the following languages:

Rehus-Beal-Ledeats
(African/Eritrean/Tigrinja)

Milad Majid
(Arabic)

FelizNavidad
(Argentine/Chili, Spanish)

Gun Tso Sun Tan’Gung Haw Sun
(Chinese, Cantonese)

Kung His Hsin Nien bing Chu Shen Tan
(Chinese, Mandarin)

Merry Christmas
(English)

Joyeux Noel
(French)

Frohliche Weihnachten
(German)

Mele Kalikimaka
(Hawaiian)

Nollaig Shona Dhuit
(Irish)

Buone Feste Natalizie
(Italian)

Shinnen omedeto. Kurisumasu Omedeto
(Japanese)

Sung Tan Chuk Ha
(Korean)

sousksan van Christmas
(Loa)

Merry Keshmish
(Navajo)

Maligayan Pasko
(Philippines)

Chuc Mung Giang Sinh
(Vietnamese)

And Happy New Year!