

Holiday Celebrations

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Introduction

Holidays are celebrated every day by people throughout the world. In fact, Earth Calendar (1998-2004) defines “holiday” as any day that recognizes a cultural event. This valuable resource identifies multiple holidays for each day of the year.

The holidays are categorized by date, country, religion, and lunar phases. A quality and comprehensive study of these many and diverse events may greatly enhance our knowledge of cultural groups and emphasize our connectedness to our fellow human beings. Although it’s not the major goal, this topic may stimulate such a study. The focus here is to discuss holidays



in the United States from a multicultural perspective. Specifically, this program topic focuses on a select number of cultural and ethnic celebrations. The specific purpose is to increase the participants’ knowledge of the holidays celebrated by different cultural groups in our society. In addition, this topic will help participants become involved in cultural or ethnic celebrations that they have not experienced previously and to become more actively involved with different cultural or ethnic groups in the United States.

Holiday celebrations in the United States may involve national-level observances, such as America’s Independence Day on July 4, or they may involve neighborhood observances, such as Cinco de Mayo in communities with significant Hispanic populations. Holiday celebrations usually recognize or honor important events in history. They may be commemorated for joyous and not-so-joyous reasons. They may be religious or

secular. Regardless of the reason, however, holiday celebrations are times when family and friends look to their past, present, and future. It is a time when traditions of decades and generations come together for those identifying with a particular group.

Sociological Value of Holidays

Many racial and ethnic groups have developed their own traditions and holidays for the purpose of celebrating their unique cultural backgrounds. One of these is the African American celebration of Kwanzaa. It has major sociological importance for African Americans and the larger society. Within the United States, there is a growing interest in cultural identity and heritage. Numerous festivals and parades celebrate a special event in a group’s history or honor a particular group member. Kwanzaa is a good example. This African American cultural festival, observed annually from December 26 to January 1, was begun in this country in 1966 to celebrate African heritage and to promote values esteemed in the African American community. In fact, given the diversity of cultures found in this country alone, it seems more appropriate to emphasize the phenomenon of multiculturalism than to speculate about a single world culture (Renzetti & Curran, 1998: 72).

In many cases, the celebrations have ceremonial qualities that include such rituals as chronicling. Chronicling involves conversations about past and present events. Such conversations serve to update information about the past and encourage group identity (Gavin and Brommel, 1999).

In addition to the various cultural holidays, there is recognition of cultural groups’ history and culture as evidenced in proclamations of their heritage. In each instance, the proclamations by the U.S. president call on all Americans to learn more about the history and heritage of the respective group in this great country. These actions have a reaffirming influence on the nation’s appreciation and respect for others’ traditions and way of life. They can help to preserve important parts of our American culture for future generations. Currently, the following ethnic heritage months are proclaimed:

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- Black History Month – February
- Irish American Heritage Month – March
- Asian/Pacific Heritage Month – May
- Hispanic Heritage Month – September
- Italian American Heritage Month – October
- Native American Heritage Month – November

In addition, Women’s History Month is observed during March. Here, again, the focus is on learning the history of women and honoring the contributions women have made to our society. You may view recent proclamations on the Web (www.diversitystore.com/).

Profile of Some December Holidays

African American Holiday

Kwanzaa is celebrated the last seven days of December. It was created by Dr. Manulana Karenga in 1966 for the following reasons:

- To reaffirm the communitarian vision and wisdom of African culture and to contribute to its restoration among African peoples in the Diaspora, beginning with Africans in America and expanding to include the world African community.
- To introduce and reinforce the Nguzo Saba, the Seven Principles . . . that strengthen and celebrate family, community, and culture. These seven communitarian values are: Umoja (Unity), Kujichagulia (Self-determination), Ujima (Collective Work and Responsibility), Ujamaa (Cooperative Economics), Nia (Purpose), Kuumba (Creativity), and Imani (Faith). (African Sources; *Encyclopedia Encarta*; *Encyclopedia Britannica*; *Prescott’s Mexico: 1900*; *HistoryChannel.com*; other sources. Updated May 2004.)
- To unite and to strengthen a world African community.
- To make a self-conscious statement of unique cultural truth as an African people. That is to say, it is an important way and expression of being African in a multicultural context (officialkwanzaawebsite.org/).

In recent times, Kwanzaa has become a reaffirmation of the United States’ need to respect, celebrate, and build on the rich resources of its diversity of people and cultures, to see itself as an ongoing multicultural project to create a truly just and good society, and to embrace an ethics of sharing (shared space, shared wealth, shared power, and shared responsibility) of all peoples – African, Native American, Latino, Asian, and European – to conceive and build the world they want to live in (www.web-holidays.com/).



Jewish Holiday

Chanukah, also referred to as Hanukkah, is an eight-day celebration during the month of December. The following is a definition from the *Columbia Encyclopedia*, Sixth Edition. 2003, Columbia University Press.

In Judaism, the Festival of Lights, the Feast of Consecration, or the Feast of the Maccabees; also transliterated Chanukah.

According to tradition, it was instituted by Judas Maccabeus and his brothers in 165 B.C. to celebrate the dedication of the new altar in the Temple at Jerusalem. The festival occurs in December near the time of the winter solstice, as does



Christmas, and lasts eight days. Hanukkah later came to be linked also with a miraculous cruse of oil that burned for eight days, leading to the practice of lighting special Hanukka candles, one the first evening, two the second, and so on. The eight-branched candlestand (menorah) used in that ceremony is a frequent symbol for the holiday.

According to the *Britannica Concise Encyclopedia* (2004), Chanukkah was originally a minor holiday. However, it has become more lavishly celebrated in modern times as a result of its proximity to Christmas (Hanukkah. *Britannica Concise Encyclopedia*. Retrieved July 24, 2004, from *Encyclopedia Britannica Premium Services*; www.britannica.com/ebc/article?eu=391880).

The menorah is a readily recognized symbol used in celebration of Chanukah. Both men and women are obligated to light it. It may be placed in the doorway or on a window sill facing a public thoroughfare; the lights should consist of a flammable fuel that feeds a visible flame via a wick – lamps or candles. The lights

should be lit at sunset or at nightfall and are to burn at least 30 minutes after nightfall preceding each of the eight days of Chanukah. Blessings are recited before lighting the menorah each evening. Work should not be done immediately around the lighted candles; rather, persons sit by them and tell stories related to the holiday. Giving to charities is increased during each day of Chanukah, and on Friday the giving doubles. In addition, children are

given money and encouraged to give during this festive time. Of course, food is part of the celebration, especially food cooked in oil because of its importance in the Chanukah miracle. One of the most popular foods is potato latkes (pancakes) and sufganiot (doughnuts). See *The Chanukah Guide*, *Chabad.org* (2001-2004), for more detailed information and recipes.

Would you like to know more about these holidays and others? Check the Web (www.web-holidays.com/) and (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/>) for more details about these special days.

Exercises

1. From the list of holidays (in WL 503), identify those days (and others) that are observed by West Virginia. (West Virginia observes *New Year's Day*, *Martin Luther King Jr. Day*, *Lincoln's Birthday*, *Washington's Birthday*, *Primary Election Day*, *Memorial Day*, *West Virginia Day*, *Independence Day*, *Labor Day*, *Columbus Day*, *General Election Day*, *Veterans' Day*, *Thanksgiving Day*, and *Christmas*.)
2. In groups of three, discuss the reasons why West Virginia observes the days identified in number 1 as holidays.

3. Identify the holidays that you observe other than the state's holidays.
4. In groups of twos, discuss the holiday that involves your family the most. State all the reasons why this holiday involves your family more than all other holidays.
5. Identify and discuss at least two holidays that you have heard another cultural group celebrates and that you would like to celebrate in the next year.
6. Compare the celebrations of Chanukah, Christmas, and Kwanzaa.



Favorite Recipes for Kwanzaa and Chunukah

Kwanzaa recipes may be found on the Web (http://members.tripod.com/~Nancy_J/kwanzaa.htm).

African Vegetable Stew

2 yams
1 onion (very large), chopped
1 bunch Swiss chard
1 can garbanzo beans (known also as chickpeas)
 $\frac{1}{2}$ cup raisins
several fresh tomatoes (or large can)
1 garlic clove
salt and pepper, to taste
 $\frac{1}{2}$ cup rice, raw
hot pepper sauce, to taste

Either peel the yams or scrub them well with a vegetable brush; then slice them into thick slices. Add rest of ingredients except rice and pepper sauce. Cook a couple of minutes. Make a well in the center of the mixture in the pot. Put the rice in the well and pat it down until it's wet. Cover and cook until rice is done (about 25 minutes). Add pepper sauce to taste. Yield: 4 servings

Jewish recipes, including latkes, may be found on the Web (www.chabad.org/holidays/chanukah/article.asp?AID=102819).

Chanukah Latkes

5 large potatoes, peeled
1 large onion
3 eggs
 $\frac{1}{3}$ cup of flour
1 tsp. salt
 $\frac{1}{4}$ tsp. pepper
 $\frac{3}{4}$ cup oil for frying

Grate potatoes and onion on the fine side of a grater, or in a food processing blender with a little water. Strain grated potatoes and onion through a colander, pressing out excess water. Add eggs, flour, and seasonings. Mix well. Heat $\frac{1}{2}$ cup oil in a 10-inch skillet. Lower flame and place 1 large tablespoon batter at a time into hot sizzling oil and fry on one side for approximately 5 minutes until golden brown. Turn over and fry on other side for 3 minutes. Remove from pan and place on paper towels to drain excess oil. Continue with remaining batter until used up, adding more oil when necessary. Serve with applesauce on the side. Yields: 4 to 6 servings

Conclusion

Holiday celebrations are times for recognizing past events and personalities that have made significant impressions upon a group of people. Their influence has made impact on their lives and their sense of freedom, liberty, and general well-being. The individuals are honored and the events are commemorated with respect, pride, and loyalty. The celebrations tend to promote commitment to self-determination, self-improvement, group loyalty, and responsibility. In modern times, they promote the value of diversity and an openness to multiculturalism.



References

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