

# Celebrations near the December solstice

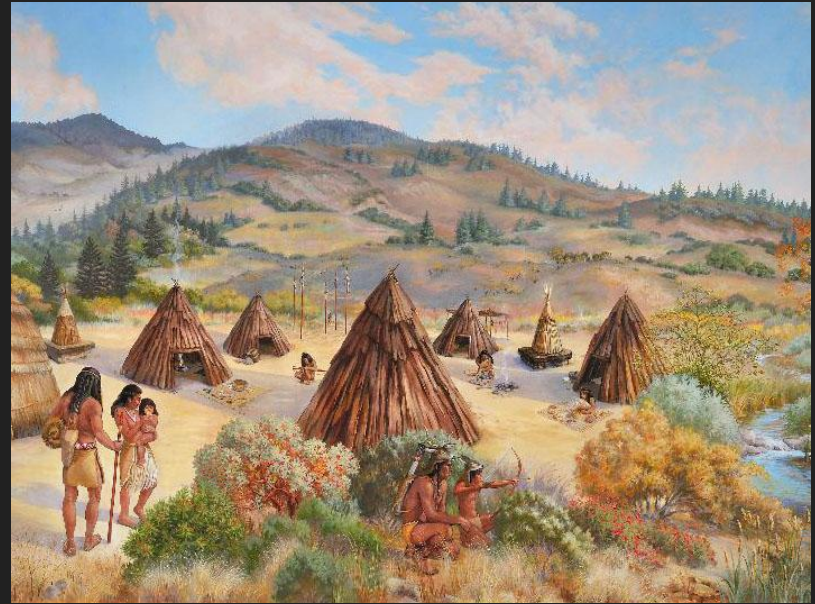
...from around the world.

Slide set edited by Alan Gould

# Ohlone Tribe

The Ohlone New Year is the Winter Solstice. These are favorite foods to feast on: mussels, clams, seasonal chanterelles, porcinis, seaweeds, and slow cooked meats, such as venison, all roasted in earth oven. It's a time to rest and sleep in, much as the living Earth rests to recharge the energy needed in months to come.

***In the San Francisco Bay area, we acknowledge and honor that we are on the homeland of the Ohlone people who continue to live and thrive here today.\****



<https://parks.smcgov.org/introduction-ohlone>

\* Since the Ohlones are still here, we use present-tense. To find and acknowledge a Tribe in your area, see the interactive Native Land map [<https://native-land.ca>].

# Soyal, Hopi Tribe

For the Zuni in western New Mexico, the winter solstice is the beginning of the year, marked with a ceremonial dance called *Shalako*. After fasting, prayer and observing the rising and setting of the sun for several days before the solstice, the Pekwin “Sun Priest” makes a long, mournful call at the exact moment of *itiwana*, the rebirth of the Sun. Then rejoicing and dancing begin, as 12 kachina clowns in elaborate masks dance along with the Shalako themselves—12-foot-high effigies with bird heads, seen as messengers from the gods.



Shalako Masks

[https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/7/75/Annual\\_report\\_of\\_the\\_Bureau\\_of\\_American\\_Ethnology\\_to\\_the\\_Secretary\\_of\\_the\\_Smithsonian\\_Institution\\_%281901%29\\_%2814596359678%29.jpg](https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/7/75/Annual_report_of_the_Bureau_of_American_Ethnology_to_the_Secretary_of_the_Smithsonian_Institution_%281901%29_%2814596359678%29.jpg)

# Dongji, South Korea

“Little new year” is a thousands-of-years-old winter solstice festival. Special dishes include tang yuan (rice balls) and patjuk (a red bean porridge). Red being a lucky color, patjuk keeps bad spirits away and embraces good wishes for the coming year.



Rice bean porridge

[Danpatjuk.jpg](#)

# Dong Zhi, China

Dong Zhi means “Winter Arrives” and occurs six weeks before the Chinese New Year. It may have begun as a harvest festival when farmers and fisherman took time off to celebrate with their families. Traditional food in southern China is tang yuan, glutinous rice balls, often brightly colored and cooked in sweet or savory broth. In northern China they enjoy plain or meat-stuffed dumplings.



Tang Yuan

[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:%E6%B1%A4%E5%9C%86\\_Cooked\\_Tang\\_Yuan\\_\(329781165\).jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:%E6%B1%A4%E5%9C%86_Cooked_Tang_Yuan_(329781165).jpg)

# Kwanzaa, African American

A 7 day celebration, Dec 26 – Jan 1, not a religious holiday, honors African American culture and heritage. It's a time to strengthen bonds with family and community. It's about 7 principles (Nguzo Saba): **Unity** (Umoja), **Self determination** (Kujichagulia), **Collective work** (Ujima), **Cooperative economics** (Ujamaa), **Purpose** (Nia), **Creativity** (Kuumba), and **Faith** (Imani). One candle is lit each night and the family discusses the principle of the day. The word Kwanzaa comes from Swahili and means “first fruits.”



Kwanzaa candles

[https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/thumb/d/d8/Kwanzaa\\_Candles-Kinara.svg/2560px-Kwanzaa\\_Candle-s-Kinara.svg.png](https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/thumb/d/d8/Kwanzaa_Candles-Kinara.svg/2560px-Kwanzaa_Candle-s-Kinara.svg.png)

See also

<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/12/21/dining/kwanzaa-seven-principles.html>

# Feast of Juul, Scandinavia

The Feast of Juul was a pre-Christian winter solstice festival observed in Scandinavia. Fires were lit to symbolize the heat, light and life-giving properties of the returning Sun. A Yule or Juul log burned on the hearth in honor of the Scandinavian god Thor. In England, Germany, France, and other European countries, the Yule log was burned until nothing, but ash remained. The ashes were then collected and strewn on the fields as fertilizer every night until Twelfth Night or kept as a charm or as medicine.



# Saturnalia, Ancient Rome

Saturnalia lasting 7 days starting Dec 17 honored Saturn, father of the gods, god of agriculture and time. Suspension of discipline, reversal of norms, masters serving their slaves, grudges forgotten, wars postponed, masquerades, vacation from businesses, courts, and schools. Saturnalia eventually degenerated into a week-long spree of gambling, drinking, debauchery, crime, unrestrained license and revelry.



[https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/thumb/6/62/Carthago\\_exhibition\\_-\\_Statue\\_of\\_the\\_God\\_Saturn\\_Enthroned\\_%2849340909402%29.jpg/800px-Carthago\\_exhibition\\_-\\_Statue\\_of\\_the\\_God\\_Saturn\\_Enthroned\\_%2849340909402%29.jpg](https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/thumb/6/62/Carthago_exhibition_-_Statue_of_the_God_Saturn_Enthroned_%2849340909402%29.jpg/800px-Carthago_exhibition_-_Statue_of_the_God_Saturn_Enthroned_%2849340909402%29.jpg)



# Stonehenge, England

The ancient circle of huge stones, Stonehenge, lines up with the movements of the Sun.

Archaeological research suggests winter solstice festivals happened at Stonehenge and modern revelers have taken up the tradition, gathering at dawn the day after the longest night to witness the the Sun rising through the stones.



[https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/thumb/3/3c/Stonehenge2007\\_07\\_30.jpg/1920px-Stonehenge2007\\_07\\_30.jpg](https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/thumb/3/3c/Stonehenge2007_07_30.jpg/1920px-Stonehenge2007_07_30.jpg)

# Lantern Festival, Vancouver

Vancouver's Secret Lantern Society created the city's Winter Solstice Lantern Festival to honor many cultural traditions with lanterns, fire, singing, drumming, music, storytelling, and dancing. Processions march throughout the city, culminating in fire performances. There is also the Labyrinth of Light, a maze of 600 candles symbolizing letting go of old thoughts and finding new possibilities for the coming year.



[https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/thumb/4/42/Vancouver\\_BC.JPG/1920px-Vancouver\\_BC.JPG](https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/thumb/4/42/Vancouver_BC.JPG/1920px-Vancouver_BC.JPG)

# Shab-e Yalda, Iran (Persia)

To celebrate the beginning of longer days and the triumph of Mithra, the Sun God, over darkness, Shab-e Yalda (meaning “night of birth”) is marked by family gatherings, charitable acts, candles (originally fires lit all night), poetry readings (especially from the 14th-century poet Hafiz), and a feast.

Traditional foods are nuts and fruits such as watermelon and pomegranates. Some stay awake this longest night to rejoice in the moment when the Sun rises.



[https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/1/1e/Mitra-Lion\\_and\\_Sun.jpg](https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/1/1e/Mitra-Lion_and_Sun.jpg)

# Montol Festival, Cornwall, England

From ancient Cornish winter traditions, the winter solstice festival of Montol in the town of Penzance celebrates the culture of England's westernmost peninsula. A procession of "guisers" (people wearing disguises—carnival-like costumes) with lanterns create a "river of fire" meant to celebrate the return of the Sun. In the old custom, guisers would roam the streets putting on skits, songs, and pranks. Part of the fun was trying to guess who was who.



Penzance Harbour, Cornwall, England

[https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/thumb/9/9b/Penzance\\_Harbour\\_and\\_station%2C\\_Cornwall.jpg/2560px-Penzance\\_Harbour\\_and\\_station%2C\\_Cornwall.jpg](https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/thumb/9/9b/Penzance_Harbour_and_station%2C_Cornwall.jpg/2560px-Penzance_Harbour_and_station%2C_Cornwall.jpg)

# Chawmos — Pakistan

Chawmos is a New Year festival, 14 days of song, dance and ceremony near the time of the winter solstice for the small Kalash community in mountains of the Hindu Kush, Pakistan. The Kalash dance around a bonfire, linking arms and chanting prayers for the year ahead. In a purification ritual, women and girls hold bread baked for them by male family members. Villagers form a circle, sing and dance, and at times a young woman dance in the middle of the circle. A young man may enter the ring to dance with her in courtship. The festival culminates with a late-night torch procession.



<https://twitter.com/hashtag/chawmos>

# Burning the Clocks, Brighton, England

The Burning of Clocks festival in the seaside town of Brighton is solstice parade, bonfire, and fire show. A procession of people wearing costumes representing clocks and the passage of time carry lanterns made of wood and paper to the beach, where the lanterns are burned in a huge bonfire, symbolizing the wishes, hopes, and fears that will be passed into the flames.



[https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/c/c3/Burning\\_Clocks\\_-\\_Brighton\\_%283127964071%29.jpg](https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/c/c3/Burning_Clocks_-_Brighton_%283127964071%29.jpg)

# Newgrange gathering, Ireland

This 5,200-year-old tomb and ancient temple is aligned to the winter solstice. A small opening above the entrance fills with light on sunrises near the solstice, the dramatic effect lasting for 17 minutes. It's speculated to mark the beginning of a new year and the triumph of light over darkness. Today, visitors can apply for a lottery drawing to be inside the temple at the moment of the sunrise while others gather outside the monument.



[https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/5/57/Newgrange\\_passage\\_tombs\\_dolmens.jpg](https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/5/57/Newgrange_passage_tombs_dolmens.jpg)

# Lucia Day, Scandinavia

Lucia is an ancient mythical figure with a role as a bearer of light in the dark Swedish winters. A procession of young women in white robes, red sashes, and wreaths of candles on their heads, light the way through the darkness of winter. St. Lucia was an early Christian martyr, Dec 13 being the day in 304 A.D. when the Romans killed her for bringing food to persecuted Christians in Rome. Early Norse solstice traditions of bonfires to scare away evil spirits merge with Christian ones after many converted to Christianity around 1000 A.D. Traditional foods are gingersnaps, saffron-flavored buns, and glogg.



Santa Lucia feast in Stockholm 1937

[https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/9/95/Albert\\_Szent-Gyorgyi\\_at\\_the\\_Santa\\_Lucia\\_feast\\_in\\_Stockholm\\_1937.jpg](https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/9/95/Albert_Szent-Gyorgyi_at_the_Santa_Lucia_feast_in_Stockholm_1937.jpg)



# Toji, Japan

Winter solstice in Japan is called Toji. It's a sacred time for farmers who light bonfires symbolizing the return of the Sun to nurture their crops after a long, cold winter. Huge bonfires burn on Mount Fuji each Dec 22. Traditional food is kabocha, a winter squash. A hot bath with yuzu citrus fruits is to refresh body and spirit, ward off illness, and soothe dry winter skin. Capybaras, the world's largest friendly rodents, supposedly love yuzu baths.



Capybaras

# Santo Tomas Festival, Guatemala

The Catholic church has the feast of St. Thomas on July 3, but in Chichicastenango, Guatemala, the festival is celebrated the week leading up to the winter solstice. It is marked with brightly colored traditional costumes, masks, parades, fireworks, and music. Mayas honor the Sun god with a ritual Palo Volador, or “flying pole dance.” Three men climb a 50-foot pole. One beats a drum and plays flute, while the other two wind a rope around the pole and around one foot then jump. The goal is to land on their feet to please the Sun god so the days will get longer.



Palo Volador

[https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/thumb/9/9b/Volador de Papantla en Tequila.jpg/1920px-Volador de Papantla en Tequila.jpg](https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/thumb/9/9b/Volador_de_Papantla_en_Tequila.jpg/1920px-Volador_de_Papantla_en_Tequila.jpg)

# Inti Raymi, Peru, Incas

Peru, in the Southern Hemisphere, has the winter solstice in June. The Inti Raymi (“sun festival”) on the solstice honored Inti, the Sun god. There were three days of fasting and before dawn on the 4th day, they waited in a ceremonial plaza. At sunrise they offered golden cups of chicha, a sacred beer made from fermented corn. A mirror was used to focus the Sun’s rays and start a fire. There were feasts and sacrifices of animals or possibly even humans. The Spaniards banned the Inti Raymi holiday, but a local group of Quecia Indians in Cusco, Peru, revived the festival in the 1950s with mock sacrifices.



Inti Raymi in Cuzco, Peru

[https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/thumb/f/fb/Inti\\_Raymi.jpg/1920px-Inti\\_Raymi.jpg](https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/thumb/f/fb/Inti_Raymi.jpg/1920px-Inti_Raymi.jpg)

# Hanukkah

Hanukkah (Chanukah) or Festival of Lights is an 8-day Jewish celebration commemorating the 2nd century B.C. rededication of the 2nd Temple in Jerusalem where Jews had risen up against their Greek-Syrian oppressors in the Maccabean Revolt. It begins the 25th of Kislev of the Hebrew calendar, usually falling in Nov or Dec. Celebration includes the lighting of the menorah each night, oil-based foods (latkes, sufganiyot, dairy foods), games (dreidel), and gifts.



Menorah

# Christmas

Christmas on Dec 25 commemorates the birth of Jesus Christ. Red and green are associated with Christmas because ancient Celtic peoples revered red- and green-colored holly plants for being evergreen keeping Earth beautiful during the dead of winter. When they celebrated the winter solstice, they decorated their homes with holly to bring protection and good luck in the coming year.



Holly

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Photo sources are in the captions

**Interactive Native Land map** - <https://native-land.ca>

***Untold History: The Survival of California's Indians***  
<https://www.kcet.org/shows/tending-the-wild/untold-history-the-survival-of-californias-indians>

**Native-led organizations** (San Francisco Bay area):

mak-'amham/Cafe Ohlone <https://www.makamham.com>

Advocates for Indigenous California Language Survival (AICLS; <https://aicls.org>)

Intertribal Friendship House (Oakland)  
<https://www.ifhaurbanrez.org>

California Indian Museum and Cultural Center (Santa Rosa) - <https://cimcc.org>

California Indian Basketry Association (CIBA; <https://ciba.org>),