

011221 Christmas Traditions

Growing up in the US, I had always assumed that people all over the world celebrated Christmas in similar ways. I assumed that people exchanged gifts on the 25th of December and celebrated on that day. When I was traveling in Norway with my international group of friends, I came to realize just how wrong I was in these assumptions. Since I live in an international community where traditions from dozens of countries are represented, I thought that it would be really neat to compile a collection of different traditions. I asked several of my friends if they could tell me more about Christmas in their countries. However, the idea came to me just as the semester was wrapping up and everyone became extremely busy and stressed about final projects and finals. I very much appreciate the contributions that I did receive because I know that everyone had lots of other things to do, so thank you.

Lets begin with the Christmas traditions that started my interest, those of Austria.

Austria as told by Karin Kampel

The celebration of Christmas in Austria begins on December 6th. According to Austrian tradition, families are visited by two people on this day. One person is Nicholas who is a bishop and so comes dressed in a bishop hat and staff. The other person is Krampus who is personified as a devil with horns and a red face. Nicholas and Krampus will ask the children if they have been good children. If they have been good, Nicholas will give them presents. If they have been bad, Krampus will hit them with a stick.

Krampus is a tradition that lasts past childhood. Karin tells that you can buy Krampus masks in Austria and on the 6th you need to beware of people running about with the Krampus masks and sticks who will playfully hit people on the head during the evening. So, Karin suggests that if you do go out on that evening, that you bring lots of people with you. (Editors note: You may want to rearrange your schedule if you ever plan to travel in Austria on the 6th).

Christmas itself is celebrated on December 24th. The adults spend the morning decorating the Christmas tree while the children anxious await the coming of the evening and the present that it will bring. In the evening, the children are allowed to see the tree and the presents underneath of it. The presents come from either Santa Clause or Christkind (a small angel with wings and fair hair), depending on what the parents tell the children. Sometime during the month of December, the children have written to Christkind to tell him what it is that they want.

Christmas in Australia by Kat Morris

As you probably know Australia lies in the southern hemisphere... now one of the effects of this (aside from a late discovery by Europeans) is that at Christmas time, rather than being winter, it is well.... hot. Now it took my Aussie family a little while (especially my grandma) to work out that replicating this European big baked dinner thing just didn't work so well.... so now we tend to have salads and maybe some seafood. My family are generally camping at the beach (with all my relatives), so that kind of dictates the culture of Christmas for me. It is nearly always really sunny and we spend most of the time at the beach and in the sun outside our tents. Even though we eat lighter food, we still eat all day...so you still have that feeling of having eaten so much you just want to roll over (well actually you have no other alternative. There is also generally beer and probably slightly more beer than that...(something we have in common with Denmark :-P). I love the fact that it is warm. Sure it means that when Santa Claus comes to visit the kids, he is nearly melting wearing a big snow suit and beard (I hope no children are reading this - its real really!) You notice that the heat is getting to him, because as the day wears on and his Santa suit is more like a wetsuit, that he gives out less treats:-) It's scientifically proven.....

anyway Australia's big and if you don't like the idea of my family's Christmas there are still a good 18 million others who can tell you a different story. Merry Christmas :-) or should I say God Jul?

Christmas in Switzerland by Thomas

St Nicholas

On 6th of December, St Nicholas visits all the children with his companion, the "whipping father" (le "père fouettard" in French). St Nicholas was a bishop in Turkey, but I don't know more about him. He is dressed like a bishop, but looks like Santa Claus with his red dress. The biggest differences are his special hat (the one of bishops) and his stick a spiral at the top (also typical of bishops). His companion is dressed with a black dress and has sticks. During the visits he discusses with the children what they did good and bad and rewards them if they behaved well. Otherwise, they are punished by the "whipping" father. Nowadays, some groups offer to the families to go to their home and play St Nicholas. Therefore, if a family wants to have St Nicholas coming to their home, they call one of these groups and fix an appointment. Then they put the presents in front of the house before St Nicholas arrives with sometimes a small note about the children present in the house (their name, what they did...). When St Nicholas and the whipping father arrive, they put the present in their bag and ring their little bell before the bell of the house. They're finally introduced in the house and to the sometimes scared children. They all talk a while about the past year, the children usually sing some songs or tell some poems, after which they receive their presents. In the meanwhile, St Nicholas and the whipping father are usually offered a drink. After 20-30mn to , they leave and might have

to go to another family. This is a lot of fun to do, but one can end the visits quite drunk if the families are generous. Usually, the presents are quite small, but some families seem to give most of the present at St Nicholas instead of at Christmas, or maybe at both, who knows?

Another variation is that the child can leave his slippers out in the night between the 5th and the 6th. Then, if he has behaved well during the year, St Nichols will have left a present for him in his slippers.

Christmas

Usually, Christmas is celebrated the 24th or the 25th, but it can be celebrated a bit before or after if need be. It is usually celebrated in the families, but sometimes the godfathers and godmothers of the children are invited a bit before, like around the 23rd. The families usually have a tree at home decorated with some balls, tinsels, candles/lamps and, of course, chocolate. The chocolate usually has different shapes, like pine cones, balls, bells... There is on the other hand no special Christmas dish. Some families might have their own tradition, but most don't and just do something fancier than usual. As some families celebrate it two (or more?) times, e.g. with both sides of their family, one meal might be simpler than the other, so that one don't have too big an indigestion! The presents are given during the celebration. They are usually gathered under the tree and the children have to sing a song or tell a poem before getting his. I usually had to play the piano. One more detail is that most of the catholic families go to the church for the "midnight celebration" on the 24th, at midnight. The attendance probably depends on the area (rural/urban) and I don't if the protestants have the same tradition (Catholics and Protestants are the two main .

"Red Nose"

In Switzerland, I live in a rural area and the inhabitants are well-known for drinking a lot. As there is usually a lot of parties or meetings and because the weather is not that good during winter (rain, ice, snow), there was quite some car accidents around Christmas. To make roads safer, a service called "Red Nose" was set up. When one was too drunk to drive back home, he could call "Red Nose" to have a safe ride. It works as follow: two guys of "Red Nose" come in one car. Then, one takes the client's car and drives to the client's home while the second follows with their car. When they arrived to the client's home, they leave him and his car and drive to their headquarters with their car.

Christmas and related Celebrations in Mexico by Roberto E. Dounce

In Mexico, apart to having a Christmas tree, it is a very strong custom to represent Jesus been born with small figures. This is called "Nacimiento" which means, "Give birth". In English they are called Nativity Scene. The figures can be made of several materials. The traditional one is clay. But it is possible to find figures made of paper, and of course of plastic. It is a family matter to set up this model.

Posadas

Nine days before Christmas, in the evenings, people celebrate special religious-social meetings called “Posadas”. I suppose the meaning of the name is related to “Dwellings”, after the struggle Jesus parents had to find a place to dwell while Mary was just about to give birth Jesus, in Belen. A “Posada” normally takes place in somebody’s house. In a way, it is similar to having a party. The host has to invite friends, and perhaps ask for help with the things needed for the Posada. A main feature of a Posada is a kind of musical play, performed by two teams. People of any age can be in this play or representation. It is particularly appealing to kids. Everybody has a little candle and a piece of paper with the lyrics of the songs they sing. The teams take turns to sing their part, and in this way they establish a predefined dialogue. One team carries the images of Joseph and Mary, Jesus parents. They walk around the house, pretending that each room is a hostel. They ask if there is room for them, and invariably the other team say that there is no room left for them. In the last room they are accepted. A free translation of the final part of the lyrics is “Come in, saint walkers, stay in this place. Yes the dwelling is modest, but I do offer it to you with all my heart ...”

After that it comes the most interesting part of the Posada: The Braking of the “Piñata”. A Piñata is a container made of clay, and covered with paper of shiny colors. It can have the shape of a star, or perhaps of a TV character, popular among kids. Piñatas are hung from a rope, and they can be moved up and down and sideways by an adult that grabs the end of the rope. The Piñata contains candies and fruit, perhaps small toys. Each kid takes his turn to try to hit the Piñata with a light bat. The younger kid is the first to try. Every kid is blinded with a handkerchief. Then they make him or her spin on his feet to try to make him or her dizzy. This also serves to make difficult to tell for the kid where the Piñata is. The multitude shouts at the blinded kid trying to guide him. But of course it is confusing because everybody shouts at the same time. Some other sing a small song: “Hit it, hit it, hit it, do not loose your precision, because if you do that, you will loose the way ...” . It is quite funny. Each kid is entitled three swings. Perhaps it will take several hits to break the Piñata. So, breaking it, can be considered team work. When the Piñata is broken it releases all their goods and all the kids jump into the candies to try to get as many as possible. From time to time, people do get hurt. It happens that the blinded kid hits somebody.

It seems like in 1587, Diego de Doria, an Augustinian monk, was authorized by the Pope to celebrate mass during the nine days before Christmas. It was taught to Mexican people that before Jesus was born, Joseph and Mary tried hard for nine days to find a place where to stay while in Belen. It is interesting to note that the Bible does not teach that. This is just another human tradition.

Christmas

The 24th of December, Christmas is celebrated in Mexico. People strive to be with their family. Married couples agree on where to go, either on the husband’s parents or with the wife’s. Delicious special food is prepared for that night. The main dish can be turkey, an

special fish dish or pork. People drink “Sidra”, a light spirit, similar to white wine made from apples. Gifts are given to one another. Christmas can last all night long.

New Year

Another very important family celebration is New Year. One particularity of it, is that at 12 at night, each one in the party hurry up to consume twelve grapes in the first minute of the year. I do not know the meaning of this tradition.

“Reyes Magos” and “Rosca de Reyes”

The fifth of January, the kids receive gifts supposedly from the “three” magii that visited Jesus. In México they are called “Los Tres Reyes Magos” Meaning “The Three Magicians Kings”. And their names, according to tradition are “Melchor”, “Gaspar” and “Baltazar”. Again, none of their names is in the Bible, and they are not magicians, but astrologers a forbidden trade penalized with death according to Moses law. Another inconsistency is that the “Tres Reyes Magos” are conceived perhaps not as saints, but at least as devoted people. Nevertheless while guided by a “star” they put Jesus live at stake, and the slain of innocent babes resulted in Betlehem.

The kids write a letter to Los Tres Reyes Magos”. In that they state that they have behaved well, and what toys or presents they want. Of course, their parents help writing the letter, so they can buy the presents to their children. Some kids tie the letter to a balloon, and let it go to the sky some days before the fifth of January. All these is very exciting to kids, but what a disappointment when you learn the truth about these Tres Reyes Magos. That is why in Mexico there is the saying: “You still believe in the Three Magii”, meaning “You are as naive as a child”. The next day, December 6th, families and friends gather together to partake in another celebration: “La Rosca de reyes”. La Rosca de Reyes is a special bread, like a big donnut. Inside of it small plastic figures of a babe are hidden. If in the piece you cut to eat, there is one of these figures, then you will have to throw a party in a special day in February, The day of “La Candelaria”.

“El Día de la Candelaria”

I think this name has something to do with a lady that makes candles, but I am not sure. The compulsory food for the Candelaria Day, is “Tamales” (a delicious Mexican snack) and Atole (a milky like drink, very delicious too!) . If I have it right, in the “Candelaria” day you are suppose to dispose the Christmas tree and pick up the nativity scene. So it is like the final Christmas related meeting.

Conclusion

Personally, I do not follow any of these traditions. In later years, there is a trend to use all this celebrations as an excuse to have wild noisy parties. It is interesting to note the resemblance that Posadas have with the wild parties Romans use to have in the Saturnals. These were also parties held every of the nine days prior to the 25th of December. Romans use to give presents to the poor neighbors. And the 25th of December was a festivity of worshipers of the Sun God Mitra. It was substituted by Christmass by the Catholic Church.

Danish Christmas traditions By Nina Olsen

You can say that Christmas in Denmark starts on the first Sunday in Advent. Most families have a Advent wreath which has 4 candles one for each Sunday in Advent. On the first Sunday you light one candle and then second Sunday you light the second candle and so forth. Some families give the children presents on the Sundays during advent.

Many children also receive a “package calendar” with a small present for each day in December until the 24th. There are many different versions of “the julekalender” (Christmas calendar). For one kind, you get to open a small door each day. Behind the door is a little picture. There is also a Christmas calendar broadcasted on the radio and on television. A part of a story is told each day with the big finale on the 24th of December. One of the most popular Christmas calendars is called actually called “the julekalender” and it has a very particular form of humor: black and ironical. It also mixes the Danish language with the English language. It is now a cult classic.

December is a month when the Danish do more “hygge” than usual. There are many gatherings with gløgg and æbleskiver (small cake of batter baked in a special kind of pan on the stove). Also there are all the “julefrokoster” (Christmas lunches) where you meet with your family, colleagues, groups of friends or any clubs or societies you are a member of. You eat a lot of traditional Christmas food, drink juleøl (Christmas beer) and snaps.

Christmas is celebrated on the 24th of December. Many families go to church on this day. Afterwards, you have a big Christmas dinner which normally will consist of: Flæskesteg (pork roast), andesteg (duck) or gås (goose) with white and brown potatoes, rødkål (red cabbage) and brown sauce. The brown potato is brown because they are covered with a caramel layer. For dessert it is normal to have ris ala mande, which is a rice pudding with whipped cream and almonds served with hot cherry sauce. A whole almond is put into the pudding and the person who finds the almond receives a gift.

After that the family members dance around the Christmas tree while singing Christmas carols. Finally, you get to open your presents. For Christmas a lot of special cookies are made: pebernødder, klejner, jødekager, finskrød, vanillekrans and many more. Also a lot of candy is made, especially candy made out of marzipan and nougat covered with chocolate. Most of the foods and baked goods are available pre made in the supermarket. So even if you can't convince a Danish person to cook you a some traditional Christmas food, there is no excuse not to try it out.

By the way, if you are among those who think that Santa Claus lives on the North Pole, Finland, etc then you are probably mistaken! Because Santa Claus lives on Greenland and in Denmark he delivers the gifts on the 24th of December. If you do not believe me, you can check out the following webpages which is available in Danish, English and German: www.santa.gl

These emails are regularly sent to people in 8 countries (US, Ireland, Germany, Ecuador, Japan, China, Indonesia, and India). If anyone would like to add their own holiday traditions, please let me know and I will pass them on.

Have a Merry Christmas, everyone!

Jeff

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