

A 'zine introducing the casual browser to some of the other festivals and celebrations that take place on or around the month of December that are otherwise overshadowed by the tinsel-y behemoth that is Christmas.

It's
NOT
Only
Christmas
!

Sol Invictus

The festival of *Sol Invictus* on the 25th December in the later Roman empire combined the festivals of both the old sun god (*Sol Indiges*) and the new official sun god (*Deus Sol Invictus*). The Circus Maximus had been dedicated to Sol Indiges since ancient times, and then was dedicated to *Sol Invictus*. The Roman emperor Aurelian created the cult of Sol Invictus during his reign in AD 270-275 (in the 3rd century) and, on his coins, Sol was described as '*Dominus Imperii Romani*', the official deity of the Roman empire. The cult of *Sol Invictus* was centred in Rome but it was followed across the Roman empire. *Sol Invictus*, the god of the sun, was one of the most important gods and he symbolised victory, as he defeated darkness and rose every morning. *Sol Invictus* was the patron of Roman soldiers.

Source: <https://www.thecolchesterarchaeologist.co.uk/?p=22534>

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Introduction

Although sometimes unintentional these days, the Christmas Holiday season blocks out other festivals that take place during and around December.

This is due to the fact that although many countries are ostensibly secular, they were founded and are populated by a majority Christian population, this makes Christian high and holy days the default, and has the effect of occluding the celebration of feast days of those of other faiths.

This zine is an introduction to some of the other festivals that take place over the month of December.

Hanukkah

The eight-day Jewish celebration known as Hanukkah or Chanukah commemorates the rededication during the second century B.C. of the Second Temple in Jerusalem, where according to legend Jews had risen up against their Greek-Syrian oppressors in the Maccabean Revolt. Hanukkah, which means “dedication” in Hebrew, begins on the 25th of Kislev on the Hebrew calendar and usually falls in November or December. Often called the Festival of Lights, the holiday is celebrated with the lighting of the menorah, traditional foods, games and gifts.

The events that inspired the Hanukkah holiday took place during a particularly turbulent phase of Jewish history. Around 200 B.C., Judea—also known as the Land of Israel—came under the control of Antiochus III, the Seleucid king of Syria, who allowed the Jews who lived there to continue practicing their religion. His son, Antiochus IV Epiphanes, proved less benevolent: Ancient sources recount that he outlawed the Jewish religion and ordered the Jews to worship Greek gods. In 168 B.C., his soldiers descended upon Jerusalem, massacring thousands of people and desecrating the city’s holy Second Temple by erecting an altar to Zeus and sacrificing pigs within its sacred walls.

Led by the Jewish priest Mattathias and his five sons, a large-scale rebellion broke out against Antiochus and the Seleucid monarchy. When Matthathias died in 166 B.C., his son Judah, known as Judah Maccabee (“the Hammer”), took the helm; within two years the Jews had successfully driven the Syrians out of Jerusalem, relying largely on guerilla warfare tactics. Judah called on his followers to cleanse the Second Temple, rebuild its altar and light its menorah—the gold candelabrum whose seven branches represented knowledge and creation and were meant to be kept burning every night.

According to the Talmud, one of Judaism’s most central texts, Judah Maccabee and the other Jews who took part in the rededication of the Second Temple witnessed what they believed to be a miracle. Even though there was only enough untainted olive oil to keep the menorah’s candles burning for a single day, the flames continued flickering for eight nights, leaving them time to find a fresh supply. This wondrous event inspired the Jewish sages to proclaim a yearly eight-day festival.

Ōmisoka

December 31 is arguably one of the most significant dates on the Japanese calendar. Known as ōmisoka, it encompasses a range of special customs and observances, both traditional and modern, intended to set people on the right foot for the coming New Year.

Oshōgatsu (New Year) traditions are infused with the much-revered concept of engi, a noun that can broadly be translated as “luck.” Ensuring good fortune in the coming year requires carrying out year-end preparations with careful attention to detail. Leaving loose ends is considered inauspicious, and ōmisoka stands as the final day to bring any unfinished business to a close and prevent the misfortunes of one year from spilling over to the next.

Year-end cleaning, or ōsōji, is also an important part of ōmisoka and is thought to have ties to susubarai, the traditional end-of-year dusting of regalia at Buddhist temples and Shintō shrines. The custom is said to have started in the Edo period (1603–1868) and was slowly adopted by households over time. Aside from purifying the home prior to the New Year, the removal of 12 months’ worth of clutter and detritus is welcomed by many as a way to reflect on the year past.

Source: <https://www.nippon.com/en/nipponblog/m00060/omisoka-ringing-out-the-year-in-japan.html>

Yule

In most traditions, Yule is the Sabbat that begins the Wiccan Year. This is the Winter Solstice—the shortest day and longest night we will experience in the Northern Hemisphere. Though it's typically celebrated on December 21st, the exact moment of the Solstice varies from year to year due to a slight misalignment between the Gregorian calendar and the actual rate of the Earth's rotation around the Sun. It also occurs at differing local times, so that depending on where you live, it may fall the day before or the day after the date listed on any given calendar.

Yule, a fire festival, is a time of celebrating the return of the light. From this point forward, the days will gradually grow longer again, until we reach the height of the Sun's power at the Summer Solstice. Although we will still see comparatively little of the the Sun's light for several more weeks, this Sabbat reminds us to have patience—the waning half of the year is over, and warmth, growth, and light will reign again!

The significance of the Winter Solstice has been recognized for thousands of years, ever since human beings first observed the ever-changing patterns of sunrise and sunset over the course of the seasons. The ancient Romans, Greeks, and Persians all held festivals at this time, many of which celebrated the birth of one or more gods. Of course, the leaders of the early Christian church decided that this was a good time to celebrate the birth of Jesus as well, since one of their strategies for winning converts was to align their holidays with already-existing pagan festivals. The name "Yule" actually comes from the pre-Christian festivities of Germanic tribes, and is believed to have been handed down from the ancient Norse in particular.

Source: <https://wiccaliving.com/wiccan-calendar-yule-winter-solstice/>

Jewish scholars have suggested that the first Hanukkah may have been a belated celebration of Sukkot, which the Jews had not had the chance to observe during the Maccabean Revolt. One of the Jewish religion's most important holidays, Sukkot consists of seven days of feasting, prayer and festivities.

The Hanukkah celebration revolves around the kindling of a nine-branched menorah, known in Hebrew as the hanukiah. On each of the holiday's eight nights, another candle is added to the menorah after sundown; the ninth candle, called the shamash ("helper"), is used to light the others. Jews typically recite blessings during this ritual and display the menorah prominently in a window as a reminder to others of the miracle that inspired the holiday.

In another allusion to the Hanukkah miracle, traditional Hanukkah foods are fried in oil. Potato pancakes (known as latkes) and jam-filled donuts (sufganiyot) are particularly popular in many Jewish households. Other Hanukkah customs include playing with four-sided spinning tops called dreidels and exchanging gifts. In recent decades, particularly in North America, Hanukkah has exploded into a major commercial phenomenon, largely because it falls near or overlaps with Christmas. From a religious perspective, however, it remains a relatively minor holiday that places no restrictions on working, attending school or other activities.

Source: <https://www.history.com/topics/holidays/hanukkah>

Kwanzaa

Kwanzaa is a seven day festival that celebrates African and African American culture and history. Kwanzaa takes place from 26th December to 1st January.

The name Kwanzaa comes from the phrase 'matunda ya kwanza' which means 'first fruits' in the Swahili language (an Eastern African language spoken in countries including Kenya, Uganda, Tanzania, Mozambique and Zimbabwe). Kwanzaa is mostly celebrated in the USA.

Kwanzaa Candles

During Kwanzaa a special candle holder called a kinara is used. A kinara hold seven candles, three red ones on the left, three green ones on the right with a black candle in the center. Each night during Kwanzaa a candle is lit. The black, center, candle is lit first and then it alternates between the red and green candles starting with the ones on the outside and moving inwards. This is quite similar to the lighting of the menorah in the Jewish Festival of Lights, Hanukkah.

The seven days and candles in Kwanzaa represent the seven principles of Kwanzaa (Nguzo Saba):

- Umoja: Unity - Unity of the family, community, nation and race
- Kujichagulia: Self-Determination - Being responsible for your own conduct and behaviour
- Ujima: Collective work and responsibility - Working to Help each other and in the community
- Ujamaa: Cooperative economics - Working to build shops and businesses
- Nia: Purpose - Remembering and restoring African and African American cultures, customs and history
- Kuumba: Creativity - Using creating and your imagination to make communities better
- Imani: Faith - Believing in people, families, leaders, teachers and the righteousness of the African American struggle

There are also seven symbols used in Kwanzaa. The seven items of often set on a Kwanzaa table, with the kinara, in the house:

- Mkeka: The Mat - A woven mat made of fabric, raffia, or paper. The other symbols are placed on the Mkeka. It symbolises experiences and foundations.
- Kikombe cha Umoja: The Unity Cup - Represents family and community. It is filled with water, fruit juice or wine. A little is poured out to remember the ancestors. The cup is share between people and each person takes a sip.
- Mazao: The Crops - Fruit and vegetables from the harvest. These normally includes bananas, mangoes, peaches, plantains, oranges, or other favorites! They are shared out.
- Kinara: The Candleholder - It represents the days, and principles of Kwanzaa.
- Mishumaa Saba: The Seven Candles - are placed in the kinara. Black, red and green are the colors of the Bendera (African Flag).
- Muhindi: The Corn - There is one ear of corn of each child in the family. If there are no children in the family, then one ear is used to represent the children in the community. It represents the future and the Native Americans.
- Zawadi: Gifts - Gifts given to children during Kwanzaa are normally educational, such as a book, dvd or game. There's also a gift reminding them of their African heritage.

Source: <https://www.whychristmas.com/customs/kwanzaa.shtml>