



Festivals

Many different festivals from around the world are now celebrated in Britain. Appreciating the significance of festivals to other cultures is a good way to develop an understanding for a particular culture. Equally, it can be fun to discover the traditions and conventions that many cultures share. Here we concentrate on a few general themes common to festivals, chosen in an attempt to show that while each is unique to its particular community, many of these festivals celebrate similar aspects of tradition, or are celebrated in similar ways.



Celebrations of the New Year

Many New Year customs note the passing of time with both regret and anticipation. For many people the first day of the New Year sets the tone for the whole year to come.



Some traditions began as a remembrance of significant events in a community's past. In **Sikhism**, 14 April symbolises the New Year, or **Baisakhi**. It also commemorates the martyrdom of Guru Teg Bahadur, who was killed for protecting freedom of worship for both Sikhs and Hindus. Similarly, in Islam, **Al Hijra** marks the departure, of the Prophet Muhammad from Mecca to Medina, creating the first Islamic state. Muslims celebrate their New Year on the first day of the month of Muharram, or around late January/early February, by telling stories about the Prophet and his companions.

In Judaism **Rosh Hashanah** celebrates the New Year between 6 September and 5 October in the Gregorian calendar. Rosh Hashanah represents a time for the Jewish community to reflect on the past year and start thinking about the one to come. The Shofar will be sounded – a horn that is blown like a trumpet. A special treat is apples dipped in honey as a symbol of a sweet new year.

Chinese New Year is popularly celebrated here with grand parades and



tasty sweets. However, the Chinese community isn't the only one that celebrates **Lunar New Year** at this time. People from the **Vietnamese** and **Korean** communities also celebrate their New Years according to the same lunar calendar as the Chinese: between late January and early February. Just as in Chinese celebrations, the Vietnamese include fireworks, dragon and lion dances, adults giving money in red envelopes to children for good luck, and special meals with family and friends. In the Korean community on the morning of the New Year after eating the specially prepared breakfast, younger people bow to their elders to wish them good luck and long life, and receive money as a treat. Besides parades and fireworks, people from these communities also clean their houses in order to symbolically sweep away bad fortune for a fresh New Year.



People from the **Thai** community also clean their houses and public places in preparation for the New Year, known as **Songkran** or 'Water Festival' because



people splash each other with water (using anything from bowls or hoses to spray guns) to 'wash away' bad luck. One of the most important observances is

paying respect to elders and spending time with the family. Thais give presents and pour drops of scented water into the hands of their parents and grandparents as a sign of thankfulness and respect. In the **Iranian** community, the New Year is known as **NoRuz**, and is celebrated during the 13 days leading to the Vernal Equinox. Many other countries with Persian influence also celebrate the New Year at this time, such as Iraq, Afghanistan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Azerbaijan, Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and people from the Parsee community in India.

Celebrations of Life and Death

Ten days before the beginning of NoRuz is a **Zoroastrian** festival called , also known as **Mukhtad** to people of the Parsee community. Parsee traditions include saying prayers in temple and offering fruit, flowers, incense, wood and money to the visiting spir-

its who have returned to earth. In Iran, children and some adults wrap themselves in shrouds to act out the visits of the spirits, and knock on doors to ask for treats. This tradition is similar to modern-day



Halloween, which is celebrated on 31 October. Originally, Halloween was based on the festival of **Samhain**, the Celtic festival of the dead. On this day it was said that ghosts returned

to the world of the living, so people would leave food and wine to please them. Fancy dress became associated with Halloween because people believed that dressing up would fool visiting ghosts into thinking that they too were ghosts. An ancient tradition for both Samhain and Farvardigan was the lighting of bonfires to honour and welcome the dead back to earth.

Honouring the deceased and celebrating life are themes present in many cultural traditions. In Mexico, **Día de los Muertos**, or the 'Day of the Dead', is a festive time in the first two days of



November when people welcome the departed back into their home, clean and decorate deceased family members' graves, tell stories about them, offer them



food from altars, and generally remind the living about the dead. In China the 7th month of the lunar calendar represents the **Ghost Festival**,

which is more of a solemn time, when people also welcome ghosts and spirits back to earth by placing food offerings on altars, and burning 'hell money' so their deceased relatives have something to spend in the afterlife.

Among Christians, one of the most important holidays is the celebration of life and death at **Easter**. In Greek, the word for Easter is Pascha, meaning 'Passover', or the passing over from death to life and from earth to heaven by Christ. An Easter tradition in Greece and elsewhere is colouring hardboiled eggs red to signify the blood of Christ, and then playing a game where one person raps their egg with another's. Whoever's egg is the last to crack is considered lucky. A tradition for Roman Catholics in the **Polish** community is for boys to splash girls with water on Easter Monday, or **Smigus-dyngus**. This practice, similar to what Thais do for Songkran Day, is probably more for the amusement of boys than girls!

Another of the most widely celebrated Christian holidays is **Christmas**, the birth of Christ. In **Ethiopia** the majority of Christians are Orthodox Christians and their Christmas is on 7 January rather than 25 December. Ethiopians receive candles as they enter their church. After lighting the candles everyone walks around the church three times and then stands through the mass. In **Sweden** candle lighting also has significance. The Christmas festivities begin on the first Sunday of Advent when a candle is lit on the special Advent candlestick holding five candles. On each Sunday from then

until Christmas another candle is lit. Feasting begins on 13 December with Lucia Day, which legend said was the longest day of the year. Girls dress in a white gown



with a crown of candles in their hair (now battery operated for safety reasons!); boys carry a candle, also dress in white, and wear a pointed hat with a star on top. Here in the UK Christmas and lights also go hand in hand with the practices of decorating houses, streets and shops with lights and the



grand lighting of the Christmas tree in London's Trafalgar Square. And Christmas couldn't be celebrated without the lighting of the Christmas pudding!

Celebrations of Light

Many festivals feature light as an integral aspect of the tradition and some festivals are dedicated to light. The Jewish festival of **Hanukkah** is celebrated this year from 16 to 23 December. It represents the re-dedication of the Temple to God after it was destroyed, and the miracle of the small amount of sanctified oil salvaged from the destruction burning for eight days. Today Jewish families light a new candle on their Menorah, or nine-stemmed candelabrum, every night for eight nights with one extra candle to light the rest—and that's why it's known as the Festival of Lights.



Another celebration known as the Festival of Lights is **Diwali**, a **Hindu**, **Sikh** and **Jain** festival, when people light lamps around their houses. Diwali occurs on the 15th day of the Hindu month of Kartika, which is around late



October/early November. It marks both the celebration of life and the beginning of the season in which new crops are sown for the coming year. As with the Chinese, Vietnamese and Thai New Year celebrations, houses are cleaned for Diwali, gifts are exchanged and many special meals are prepared.

Festivals of Feasting

Traditionally the words feast and festival were interchangeable when talking about religious holidays. Now, however, the word feast has come to mean an elaborate meal. While feasts are often central to festivals, there are particular festivals that are specifically about the feast, like harvest festivals for example.

Before the beginning of Diwali, people from **Vietnam** celebrate a festival called **Tet Trung Thu**, or the Mid-Autumn Moon Festival, which marks the end of the harvest season. This festival in late September and early October is dedicated to children. Traditionally parents, working hard for the harvest and unable to spend time with their children, use this festival to make up for lost time with their children and help them make lanterns for a candlelit procession at dawn. On the same day the Chinese community celebrates **Chung Ch'u**, the

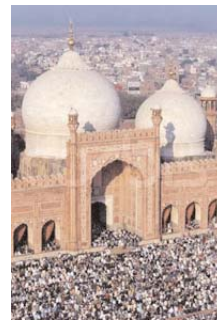


Mid-Autumn Moon Festival. While Tet Trung Thu is a children's festival in Vietnam, in China it is a festival dedicated to women. In both cultures they celebrate the myth of the Moon Goddess and eat delicious cakes filled with a sweet paste made from either lotus seed or beans and shaped to resemble the moon!

The **Jewish** festival of **Sukkot** recalls the period when the children of Israel wandered in the desert, living in temporary shelters after their exodus from Egypt. The word Sukkot refers to the booths or huts they lived in and now people make huts like these in which to eat their meals and entertain guests in order to relive the history. Similarly, the legend of the **Ga** people tells that they journeyed across Africa before arriving and settling in **Ghana**. They experienced extreme hardship during their journey but were rewarded with a plentiful harvest. Their harvest festival, celebrated throughout August, is called **Homowo**, meaning 'hooting or jeering at hunger', mocking the hunger they experienced during their journey across Africa.



One of the biggest feast celebrations around the world is the Muslim holiday of **Eid ul Fitr**, popularly known as Eid, which marks the end of the fasting period of Ramadan. Fitr means 'to break the fast', and during this time of celebration people wear their best clothes, come together as a community to pray, renew friendships and family ties. Eid is a time of forgiveness, fellowship and unity as well as a time of giving and sharing.



Jessica Mai Sims
Research and Policy Analyst
Runnymede Trust

Resources

The **Real Histories Directory** (www.realhistories.org.uk) contains a number of resources that might help with teaching and learning about the various festivals celebrated by different communities in the UK. A good place to start might be the **BBC Schools Religious Festivals** website (www.bbc.co.uk/schools/religion/), which gives dates and background information on the main festivals celebrated by the six major faiths.

There are, too, a number of artefacts that may prove useful in bringing the topic to life. The aptly-named **Festival Shop** (www.festivalshop.co.uk/) supplies by mail order. *The Festival Year 2007*, a calendar/poster, covers the major faith traditions and provides details of each festival including the date and purpose plus background information on the faith itself. *A World of Recipes Festival Collections—Christmas Food* presents recipes from all over the world wherever Christmas is celebrated. You can make a beef recipe from Argentina called 'babies in blankets', learn to make the mushroom soup that Polish people enjoy on Christmas Eve, or Christmas pudding ice-cream from Australia.

Multicultural Matters (www.multicultural-matters.com/) also have a publication that lists festivals in 2007 for practically every community in the UK (Christian, Sikh, Japanese, Buddhist, Cameroonian,

Burmese, Sudanese, Rastafarian, Greek Cypriot, etc.) for £65. Or you can subscribe to receive a monthly email listing the next month's festivals and details of how they are celebrated.

Articles of Faith (www.articlesoffaith.co.uk/) provide a range of hands-on artefacts and classroom resources for Religious Education. They have a Passover Collection that includes a challah cloth, challah loaf and havdalah candle and a small-sized shofar to conjure up the sound of Yom Kippur. There is also a Lent and Easter Collection where many of the artefacts common to the traditions of Christianity are set alongside those from the Orthodox tradition. They also have a 'Happy Hanukah House' toy for young children.

Artefacts to Order (www.artefactstoorder.com/) have a number of 'Celebration Boxes' that have a variety of objects that children can handle and investigate such as special clothes, cooking utensils, music, decorations and greeting cards. The boxes could provide a focus for assemblies. For younger children, Teddy's Festival boxes include a teddy who is appropriately dressed. There are Teddy boxes for Eid, Chinese New Year, and Diwali as well as a box that covers six festivals.

Shining Star (www.shiningstar.info/) have the *My Ramadhan Fun Pack Activity Book* with games, stories, colouring, art projects, recipes and good deed charts that help to pass the time while fasting and keep young ones busy while learning about Ramadan. Children learn about Laylatul Qadr, Prophet Muhammad's generosity, revelation of the Qur'an, Eid and fasting. *The World of Christmas CD* commemorates Christmas around the world and the *Chinese Festivals CD Rom* teaches about Chinese festivals such as Chinese New Year, dragonboat festival, moon festival and more through animated stories. Children will learn the origins of Kitchen God, couplets, Dao Fu and the traditions of sticky rice cakes, Zong Zi, and more. They can listen to the stories in Chinese or English or read them in simplified or traditional Chinese characters or English.

Starbeck (www.starbeck.com/) supply schools with unusual ethnic, religious and art based artefacts including Chinese paper dragons, a New Year drum and a Lion head (to be worn). They also have Diwali lamps and Eid cards. Local authorities may also have relevant artefacts that schools can hire. For example, the **Leicester Multicultural & RE Centre** (www.leicester.gov.uk/index.asp?pgid=2321) have Chinese festival and Diwali boxes.

If celebrating festivals sparks a deeper interest in a particular faith, you can find out more from a number of sources. The **Multi-Faith Centre at the University of Derby** (www.multifaithnet.org/) has information on Baha'i Faith, Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, Jainism, Judaism, Sikhism, Zoroastrianism. **The Jewish Education Bureau** (www.jewisheducationbureau.co.uk/) have Primary School Programmes that include 'Chanukah: Festival of Lights' and 'Pesach: Festival of Freedom'.

Buddhapadipa Temple

(www.buddhapadipa.org/index.html) is based in Wimbledon, London and its website gives details of upcoming festivals and how they are celebrated in the temple. Visitors are welcome.

The Irish Society of East Anglia (www.irishsocietyofeastanglia.co.uk/) aims to promote all things Irish and their dates for the diary include, of course, St Patrick's Day on 17 March 2007 and **China People Promotions** (www.chinesemusic.co.uk/) run workshops on Chinese music, Chinese dance, Chinese calligraphy/characters and Opera face paintings as well as keeping track of Chinese New Year events.

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The Real Histories Directory

The **Real Histories Directory** (www.realhistories.org.uk) has been created as a resource tool for teachers, parents, pupils and the wider community to support them in their teaching and learning about cultural diversity in the UK. The website helps you to locate **resources** in your and other LEAs, such as storytellers, dual language books, culturally diverse toys and relevant **events** taking place in the UK. There are also items of **news** that may be of particular interest to schools and teachers.

You can also submit resources that you would like to include in the directory free of charge by visiting the site, clicking on 'Submit an entry' and following the on-screen instructions.

As well as the varied resources available, each month a new **Topic of the Month** is added with suggestions for using the Directory in the classroom and at home.

We are interested in hearing your views on our Topics and the Real Histories website. You can email comments and suggestions to: realhistories@runnymedetrust.org.