

# Holiday Traditions through the Performing Arts Activity Sheet

## Spotlight On: Holiday Traditions

Whoever we are and wherever we are from, holidays and traditions are important parts of our culture, our families, and our identity. Here are just a few places around the world, and how they celebrate winter holidays:

**Austria:** They wish each other “Froliche Weihnacton” for Christmas, and the tradition outside of the big cities is to write the initials of the three wise men in chalk on the outside of their stables. Marking the stable this way is said to protect the animals in the herds from sickness throughout the year. (C for Caspar, M for Melchoir, B for Balthazar). The name of one of their traditional Christmas cookies is “Weihnochlbaeckerei”, a mouthful of a name!

**Denmark:** They wish each other “Glædelng Jul og godt nytår”. “Jul” comes from the Nordic word for feast. The Feast of Candles dates back to the middle ages when candles and food were given to the poor. Christmas Hearts are interwoven paper hearts, made of red and white paper (from the colors of the Danish flag) and are popular decorations that are hung on Christmas trees.

**England:** The first Christmas card known to be sent was in England in the 1840s. The tradition of the Christmas cracker is traced back to a London baker from 1846. Christmas crackers are colored paper tubes, which are twisted at both ends. When cracked open, they make a popping sound. Inside are party hats or paper crowns, a riddle, a small toy or trinket. Often there will be a Christmas cracker at each place setting on the table for Christmas dinner.

**Germany:** Decorating Christmas trees began in Germany, as a pre-Christian celebration which is thought to have symbolic ties to the Garden of Eden. The first decorated trees were Paradise Baum or Tree of Paradise. Children leave shoes or boots by the fireplace for St. Nicholas instead of stockings. Many German families will hide a glass pickle ornament somewhere on their Christmas tree, and whoever finds it first gets a special present.

**Ghana:** They wish each other “Afishapa” for the Christmas festival, and decorate mango cashew or guava trees, as pine trees don’t grow in West Africa.

**Israel:** Here and throughout the world Jewish folks celebrate Hanukkah, which is a 2,000 year old celebration. You may have heard that Hanukkah is the Festival of Lights. The celebration commemorates lights that refused to go out. Around the year 165 BC, the Holy Temple of Jerusalem was being rebuilt after years of war. Those rebuilding the temple had only a small amount of oil to light the lamps in the Temple, but instead of burning for 1-2 days, the lamps burned for a full eight days and nights. Hanukkah celebrates these lights.

**Italy:** They wish each other “Buon Natale” for Christmas. “Natale” in Italian means “birthday”. Traditionally, Italians serve fish for Christmas Eve dinner. In some places as many as 10-20 different fish dishes are served at the same dinner! Christmas-time celebrations date back centuries, for in ancient Rome (the Roman Empire came to power in the 750s) the biggest festival of the year was the winter solstice celebrating Saturnalia. “La Befan”, who is a female version of Santa Claus, leaves candy and treats in children’s shoes on Christmas Eve night.

**Jamaica:** Yes, they do have reggae versions of Christmas songs! A traditional Christmas dinner might include gungo peas, chicken, oxtail and curried goat. The Jonkanoo celebration, which has become less common in recent years, but still takes place in small towns, is made up of a parade and community festivities in a tradition that was carried over from Africa.

**Norway:** They wish each other “Julenisse”, and leave porridge out for Santa.

**Philippines:** They wish each other “Maligayang Pasko” in Tagalog, (Pilipino) during a long Christmas celebration. In some places, they begin decorating for and celebrating Christmas months before. Parols, (traditional colorful lanterns) are hung at homes and offices as one of the most popular Christmas decorations.

**Poland:** They wish each other “Wesolych Swiat”, which means “Season’s Greetings”. Christmas Eve is called “Gwiazdka” which means “Little Star”, and for Wigilia, or Christmas dinner, families traditionally eat alone, without guests, as it is considered bad luck.

**Portugal:** Wishing each other “Feliz Natal”, children write letters to baby Jesus, instead of Santa, asking for gifts. Christmas Eve dinner, known as “Consado”, consists of codfish, potatoes and cabbage.

**Puerto Rico:** Children leave out water and grass or straw for the Wise Men’s camels on the eve of Epiphany, a Christian feast in memory of Jesus as represented by the three kings

**United States:** Along with Christmas, we have many other holiday traditions including Kwanzaa. The festival of Kwanzaa takes place from December 26<sup>th</sup>-January 1<sup>st</sup> and is a celebration of African-American heritage. It began in the late 1960’s as a cultural festival, not a religious one. It was modeled after harvest festivals in Africa, and is named after the Swahili phrase “mantunda ya kwanza” which means “first fruits”. A second “a” was added to the end to ensure that Kwanzaa had seven letters in it, one for each of the seven principles of Nguzo Saba of Blackness. Each day of the celebration highlights one of the seven principles: Unity, Self-Determination, Collective Work and Responsibility, Cooperative Economics, Purpose, Creativity and Faith. The kinara, a candle holder, is one of the symbols of Kwanzaa, a symbol of African roots and the “parent people”.

**Venezuela:** On Noche Buena, or Christmas Eve, many families will eat “dulce de lochoza”, which is a dish of green papaya and brown sugar cooked for hours and served cold.

### Try This!

What are your family holiday traditions? Ask your friends and family if they have traditions that they no longer celebrate today. Call a grandparent or family friend and ask about holiday traditions when they were younger. Personal stories make the best memories.

### Try This!

What are your favorite holiday songs? Why? How many holiday songs can you name? (Try this separately or together with your friends and family.)

**Did you Know?** The name “Santa Claus” comes from “Sankt Nikolaus”, or Saint Nicholas!

## Behind the Scenes

What is it that makes families and friends come out in the cold to see a holiday show year after year? Because we love it! We remember seeing it before. We have an emotional connection or reaction to the song or the story or the holiday. We feel nostalgic. Nostalgia is a memory, and a longing or a wishing for the past.

The word “nostalgia” was first used in the late 1600s. In 1678 Jean-Jacques Harder combined the Greek words “nostos” (one’s homeland) and “algos” (pain/longing). The feeling of nostalgia, was, at first, thought to be a sickness, one referring to the physical pain a sick person feels because he or she is not in his or her native land, or fears that she or he will never see that place again. Doctors diagnosed this sickness, thinking it was a serious medical disorder. During the 1600s-1800s, doctors throughout Europe sought to cure their patients of “maladie du pays” (country sickness) in French, “Heimweh” (home-pain) in German and “el mal de corazón” (heart pain) in Spanish. It wasn’t until the 1850s that people began to understand that nostalgia has to do with sadness and depression, but is not a disease.

From that time on, the meaning or understanding of nostalgia has become a little less intense. Usually nostalgia is associated with memories from childhood. Thinking back to the “good old days” has everything to do with nostalgia. Emotion is important here. Nostalgia is not just remembering something, but remembering and really missing that thing. Holiday songs, (especially “White Christmas”) are very nostalgic: “I’m dreaming of a white Christmas, just like the ones we used to know...” Memories that are this important usually involve many of your senses. Smell is strongly connected to memory: so whether the smell of Christmas trees, or the smell of sausage carts outside of ballparks, or the smell of your grandmother’s kitchen, we remember with more than words and pictures, but with our whole selves. That’s what makes nostalgia so powerful: we long for past memories with our whole bodies and hearts.

### Try This!

What are you nostalgic for? What do you miss so much you can’t stand it? How many senses can you attach to your memory? Describe the event or place, song or feeling that you are nostalgic for to your friends and family using all five senses.

## Experiencing the Theater

Whether this is your first time in a theatre, or you’ve seen dozens of live performances, the reminders below can help to make your experience as an audience member even better!

- Ushers will be happy to assist you in locating your seat, finding the restrooms or answering any of your questions about the theater. The ushers are there to help you.
- Every performance involves a special relationship between the performers and the audience. From the opening words, the actors on stage engage the audience. Appropriate laughter and applause communicate the audience’s appreciation during and after the play. The cast appreciates your response! To successfully achieve this collaboration, the audience needs to be attentive and absorbed. Even small noises and brief whispers can distract and interrupt the special magic that draws the audience into the production.
- As the theatre darkens, conversations cease and attention focuses on the stage. Sometimes the house becomes totally dark before the curtain rises. This is a time to relax, close out the “real world,” and prepare for the show.

## After the Show:

How about a festive batch of holiday cookies to continue the celebration! Now, it might take a little longer than store-bought dough, but there is something even tastier about a cookie made with family and friends. Find a friend, a mom, a dad, a brother, an aunt, a neighbor, whoever, throw on your favorite holiday CD and bust out the cookie sheets! You won't be sorry!

### Holiday Cookies

Preheat the oven to 375°. Grease cookie sheets.

Mix together:

3 ¼ cups all-purpose flour

1 ½ teaspoons baking powder

½ teaspoon salt

Using an electric mixer, beat together until blended and fluffy:

1 ¼ cups softened butter

1 cup sugar

Add and continue beating until smooth:

1 large egg

1 Tablespoon milk

2 ½ teaspoons vanilla

¼ teaspoon finely grated lemon zest (optional)

Beat the flour mixture into the butter mixture until smooth. Divide the dough in half. Place each half between large sheets of wax paper. Roll out to ¼ inch thick (be sure to check the bottom for creases—we don't want them!) Keep the wax paper in place, layer the rolled dough a ray and refrigerate for about 30 minutes (or until cold and slightly firm. Take one portion out of the fridge at a time, peel away and replace 1 sheet of the wax paper (this makes it easier to lift the cookies from the paper...) Peel away and discard the 2<sup>nd</sup> sheet of wax paper. Cut out cookies with cookie cutters, or a pint glass. With a spatula, move the cut cookies to the greased cookie sheets. Sprinkle with colored sugar if you don't want to ice them. Bake for 6-9 minutes. Rotate the sheets halfway through the baking to make them even. Let cookies cool on sheets, until the cookies firm up a little. Then cool on wire racks or brown paper bags.

Quick Vanilla Icing:

Stir together:

2 ½ cups powdered sugar

¼ cup hot water

1 teaspoon light corn syrup

¼ teaspoon vanilla

tiny drop of food coloring (optional)

Add more water to thin out the icing, if necessary, or a bit more powdered sugar to thicken. Lightly ice the cookies using a butter knife. Let cookies stand for several hours until the icing sets completely.