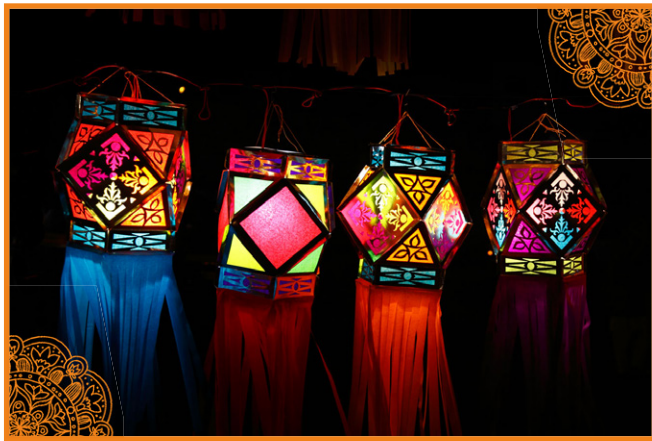


Festivals of Light Reading Comprehension

The ability of humans to produce their own light and fire is one of the things that sets us apart from the rest of the animal kingdom. It has been an integral part of the development of civilisations and so it is not surprising that this is something that cultures around the world celebrate with festivals and holidays. In many places festivities involve the lighting of candles, or the burning of large bonfires to commemorate other occasions as well but at certain times of the year, particularly as the nights begin to draw in during winter, the light itself is the thing that is celebrated.



One of the most popular and well known celebrations of light comes from the Hindu calendar. Each year in late October or early November, Indian households everywhere celebrate Diwali. It is also known as the Festival of Light after all. During this festival earthenware lamps (known as diwa or dipa), candles and even electric strings of lights are used to light courtyards and the walls and roofs of homes and businesses.

Some believe that the Diwali celebration is to celebrate the return of Rama, the legendary prince following his exile for 14 years while others see it as a tribute to Lakshmi, the goddess of prosperity. Regardless of what legendary individual is being celebrated, the bright lamps are meant to act as a welcome for them. In India, the celebration lasts for five days with each day having its own customs and rituals. A single lamp is lit and offered to Yama, Lord of Death, on the first day while on the second Hindus rise early, wash and put on new clothes for a special breakfast celebrating the victory of Lord Krishna over an evil demon. Day three is known as Lakshmi Puja and here Hindus worship Lakshmi, goddess of wealth and good fortune. The fourth day is known as the time for starting new ventures; children are given new clothes and people make visits and go to worship. The final day is known as Sister's Day when brothers visit their sisters' houses for meals.

In other celebrations throughout the world, it is candles rather than lamps that are lit to honour and celebrate. In the Thai celebration of Loy Krathong, floating vessels made from banana leaves are created and each is given a lit candle. These are known as krathong and are, once lit, set on the water of a river or the sea. It is believed that, if the candle stays lit until the little vessel is out of sight, any wish you have made upon it will come true.

Another unusual festival that features lit candles is the Swedish tradition of Luciadagen. This is celebrated on 13th December and so is seen by many to be a precursor to the Christmas season that follows. On this day, a young woman (often the eldest girl in a family) dresses up as

Saint Lucia, the Italian saint after whom the festivities are named. Saint Lucia was a young woman who during the third century took food to Christians hiding in the catacombs in Rome. She wore a wreath of candles on her head so that her hands might hold more food. The young girl portraying Saint Lucia therefore wears a long, white robe with red sash and a crown of greenery to which are fixed four candles. Special lussekatter or Lucia buns are served to parents in bed, along with coffee and any younger siblings may dress up in tall, conical hats decorated with stars. This costume for the "star boys" was once associated with a different celebration entirely, but has become intertwined with the Saint Lucia's Day celebrations over time. In many villages, the celebration moves beyond the family and Lucia Day processions take place in which the Saint Lucia figure walks through the streets of the town with her entourage, handing out the sweet, saffron buns and pepparkaka or gingerbread.



Festivals of Light Reading Comprehension

Other celebrations of light that fall during the period around the winter solstice include Hanukkah, a Jewish celebration of light that takes place in early December. Hanukkah commemorates a time when Jerusalem was freed from foreign rule over 2000 years ago. The Holy Temple needed to be rededicated for the Jewish faith but there was only enough of the special oil that burned in the temple's menorah or candelabra to last one night. Miraculously, however, the flame of the menorah continued to burn for eight nights and everyone took this to be a sign of the love of God for his people. One of the main ways in which people celebrate Hanukkah is to have a special nine branched menorah or hanukiah with candles that are lit progressively through the eight-night celebration. The extra, middle candle is the one used to light each of the rest in turn.



The Jewish festivity of Hanukkah has been celebrated for thousands of years, but another celebration that includes the use of a special candelabra is much more recent. 26th December marks the beginning of the celebration of Kwanzaa, a relatively recent addition to the festive calendar (the first observation of the holiday was in 1966). Kwanzaa is a seven-day celebration that focuses on African-American heritage and pride. The special candleholder used for this festival is called a kinara and it holds seven candles (three red, three green and one black) which are lit over the seven-day festival. These candles symbolize seven ideals to live by. Families drink from a kikombe or unity cup each night and share family memories.

Candles and lamps are not the only way to celebrate the triumph of light over dark in society. Many cultures use the bonfire as a way of celebrating. The Iranian New Year is celebrated in March as a celebration of the arrival of spring. The festivities are called Noruz or "New Day" and families celebrate in a variety of ways, which reflect on aspects of the Zoroastrian religion. One of these is the leaping over a small bonfire. As each member of the family jumps over the fire, they symbolically leave their old sorrows behind.

Another famous bonfire celebration is that of Bonfire or Guy Fawkes Night in England. This is celebrated on 5th November each year with huge, community bonfires and the setting off of fireworks. The celebration commemorates the foiled plot to blow up parliament and the King in 1605. Stuffed figures representing Guy Fawkes, one of the conspirators, are made and toured through towns in

England by children asking for a 'penny for the guy'. These figures are eventually burned on a huge bonfire reminding people of the fate of the traitors.



No matter the culture, light is an integral part of our lives as humans everywhere. This is reflected in the many, varied ways in which people celebrate around the world.