THE WINTER SOLSTICE:

The winter solstice, also known as midwinter, occurs when one of the Earth's poles has its maximum tilt away from the Sun. It happens twice yearly, once in each hemisphere (Northern and Southern). For that hemisphere, the winter solstice is the day with the shortest period of daylight and longest night of the year, when the Sun is at its lowest daily maximum elevation in the sky. At the pole, there is continuous darkness or twilight around the winter solstice. Its opposite is the summer solstice.

The winter solstice occurs during the hemisphere's winter. In the Northern Hemisphere, this is the December solstice (usually 21 or 22 December) and in the Southern Hemisphere, this is the June solstice (usually 20 or 21 June). Although the winter solstice itself lasts only a moment, the term sometimes refers to the day on which it occurs. Traditionally, in many temperate regions, the winter solstice is seen as the middle of winter, but today in some countries and calendars, it is seen as the beginning of winter. In meteorology, winter is reckoned as beginning about three weeks before the winter solstice.
Since prehistory, the winter solstice has been seen as a significant time of year in many cultures and has been marked by festivals and rituals. It marked the symbolic death and rebirth of the Sun. The seasonal significance of the winter solstice is in the reversal of the gradual lengthening of nights and shortening of days.

One of the most well-known celebrations of the solstice is Yule. Yule or Yuletide is a festival historically observed by the Germanic peoples. Scholars have connected the original celebrations of Yule to the Wild Hunt, the god Odin, and the pagan Anglo-Saxon Mōdraniht. The earliest references to it come from the 4th century CE, when the Yule-tide period lasted somewhere around two months, falling along the end of the modern calendar year between what is now mid-November and early January.

Hanukkah is a Jewish festival commemorating the rededication of the Second Temple in Jerusalem at the time of the Maccabean Revolt against the Seleucid Empire. It is also known as the Festival of Lights (Hebrew: חַג הַאוּרִים, ḥag ha’urim).

Hanukkah is observed for eight nights and days, starting on the 25th day of Kislev according to the Hebrew calendar, which may occur at any time from late November to late December in the Gregorian calendar. The festival is observed by lighting the candles of a candelabrum with nine branches, called a menorah (or hanukkiah). One branch is typically placed above or below the others and its candle is used to light the other eight candles. This unique candle is called the shamash (Hebrew: שַמָּש, "attendant"). Each night, one additional candle is lit by the shamash until all eight candles are lit together on the final night of the festival. Other Hanukkah festivities include playing the game of dreidel and eating oil-based foods, such as latkes, and dairy foods. Since the 1970s, the worldwide Chabad Hasidic movement has initiated public menorah lightings in open public places in many countries.
Although a relatively minor holiday in strictly religious terms, Hanukkah has attained major cultural significance in North America and elsewhere among secular Jews as a Jewish alternative to Christmas and is often celebrated correspondingly fervently.

CHRISTMAS

Christmas is an annual festival commemorating the birth of the first century CE Jewish rabbi, Jesus of Nazareth. The event is observed primarily on December 25 as a religious and cultural celebration among billions of people around the world. A feast central to the Christian liturgical year, it is preceded by the season of Advent or the Nativity Fast and initiates the season of Christmastide, which historically in the West lasts twelve days and culminates on Twelfth Night. Christmas Day is a public holiday in many of the world’s nations, is celebrated religiously by a majority of Christians, as well as culturally by many non-Christians, and forms an integral part of the holiday season centered around it.

The celebratory customs associated in various countries with Christmas have a mix of pre-Christian, Christian, and secular themes and origins. Popular modern customs of the holiday include gift giving; completing an Advent calendar or Advent wreath; Christmas music and caroling; viewing a Nativity play; an exchange of Christmas cards; church services; a special meal; and the display of various Christmas decorations, including Christmas trees, Christmas lights, nativity scenes, garlands, wreaths, mistletoe, and holly. In addition, several closely related and often interchangeable figures, known as Santa Claus, Father Christmas, Saint Nicholas, and Christkind, are associated with bringing gifts to children during the Christmas season and have their own body of traditions and lore. Because gift-giving and many other aspects of the Christmas festival involve heightened economic activity, the holiday has become a significant event and a key sales period for retailers and businesses. The economic impact of Christmas has grown steadily over the past few centuries in many regions of the world.
KWANZAA

Kwanzaa is an African-American celebration of life from 26 December to 1 January. Dr. Maulana Karenga created this festival for Afro-Americans in 1966 as a response to the commercialism of Christmas and as a response to the Watts Riots the previous year. In fact, one might say that Kwanzaa has similarities with Thanksgiving in the United States or the Yam Festival in Ghana and Nigeria. The word "kwanza" is a Kiswahili (Kenya, Uganda, Tanzania) word meaning "first."

Five common sets of values are central to the activities of the week: ingathering, reverence, commemoration, recommitment, and celebration. The seven principles (nguzo saba) of Kwanzaa utilize Kiswahili words: unity (umoja), self-determination (kujichagulia), collective work and responsibility (ujima), cooperative economics (ujamaa), purpose (nia), creativity (kuumba), and faith (imani). Each of the seven candles signify the principles. Like the Jewish Hannakah menorah, Kwanzaa candles are used to represent concepts of the holiday.

The symbols of Kwanzaa includes crops (mzao) which represents the historical roots of African-Americans in agriculture and also the reward for collective labor. The mat (mkeka) lays the foundation for self-actualization. The candle holder (kinara) reminds believers in the ancestral origins in one of 55 African countries. Corn/maize (muhindi) signifies children and the hope associated in the younger generation. Gifts (Zawadi) represent commitments of the parents for the children. The unity cup (Kkimbe cha Umoja) is used to pour libations to the ancestors. Finally, the seven candles (mishumaa saba) remind participants of the several principles and the colors in flags of African liberation movements -- 3 red, 1 black, and 3 green.

Gifts are exchanged. On 31 December participants celebrate with a banquet of food often cuisine from various African countries. Participants greet one another with "Habari gani" which is Kiswahili for "how are you/ how's the news with you?"