

The Winter Solstice, a Cross Cultural Event

David B. Crockett, December 30, 2007

Authors Note: The hymn immediately preceding this sermon was, “Deck the Halls with Boughs of Holly”

I like that hymn. We all associate it with Christmas, but it doesn't really have anything to do with that Holiday at all. Instead, we sing about decking the halls with boughs of holly, and burning a Yule Log.

Once upon a time (no one knows when), holly, with its glossy green leaves and bright red berries, became a symbol of life and hope continuing in a bleakly cold world. In late December, early Germanic tribes traditionally placed holly and other evergreens around the interior of their homes (such as the predecessor of our modern “Christmas Tree”) to ward off bad weather and bothersome spirits.

Many people have heard of a Yule Log (after all, it's in the song, “See the blazing Yule before us.”), but few realize that this pagan tradition dates back to the ancient Vikings. The word, “Yule” is from the Anglo-Saxon word 'Yula', meaning the 'wheel' of the year. The winter Solstice also came to be called “Yule”, and is the day when the “Great Mother Goddess gives birth to the baby Sun God”. On Yule, a huge log is kindled with holly, and burned on a communal bonfire kept alive from the previous year. Everyone sings and dances around the fire to awaken the Sun God from his winter sleep.

“Strike the harp and join the chorus.”

The word "Solstice" is derived from two Latin words: "sol" meaning sun, and "sistere," to cause to stand still, but this event was celebrated long before the Roman Empire. The winter solstice was a reason to celebrate as the Aboriginal people of the north saw the sun strengthening once more. Many months of cold weather remained, but they took heart that the return of spring was inevitable.

Most of what we know today about the Celts (who the Romans knew as “Gauls”) comes from archeological findings and a few small enclaves in Wales, Ireland and Scotland where the language and oral traditions still continue. Druids formed the “professional” class in ancient Celtic society, the teachers, healers and priests. Archaeological, genetic and linguistic studies place the Celts within a geographical range stretching from the north of Scotland to the Mediterranean, and from Spain to the Black Sea.

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The oldest records we have of the Celtic people are architectural. The Neolithic grave at Newgrange in Ireland was built circa 3200 BC, and predates Stonehenge by approximately 600 years. At dawn on the day of the Winter Solstice, sunlight enters the central chamber through a special opening. Certainly, this architectural astrological alignment was not a chance event.

The Celtic celebration of the winter solstice was called the Alban Arthuan, one of four celebrations that marked the solstice and equinox positions of the sun. Alban Arthuan was a festival of peace and a celebration of waxing solar light. Many honored the forthcoming Sun child by burning an oaken Yule log, and honored the Goddess in her many Mother aspects. The Father God was honored in various forms: as Santa Claus, the Old Sky God, Father Time, and the Holly King.

The Celts were not the only people in Europe who celebrated the winter solstice.

Author Katrien Vander Straeten writes:

Quote - It is not clear when humans realized what the solstice was and when it occurred... Around 2000 BC, the Ancient Mesopotamians marked the Winter Solstice with a festival celebrating their god Marduk's victory over darkness. The Egyptians welcomed Ra's triumph over death. With the Daygan festival, the Persian Zoroastrians dedicated the day after the Solstice to Ahura Mazda, the Lord of Wisdom.

In the Ancient Greek Festival of Lenaea, wild women tore the harvest god Dionysus to pieces and ate him, then presided over his rebirth. On the Winter Solstice, the Romans honored Saturn, the God of farming, with the Saturnalia. They also celebrated "[Dies Natalis Invicti Solis](#)", the birthday of the invincible Sun, which came to Rome via Syria." - **End quote.**

Shab-e Yalda is celebrated in Iran by followers of many religions. The Persians adopted this annual renewal festival from the Babylonians and incorporated it into the rituals of their own Zoroastrian faith, the state religion that preceded Islam. The name refers to the birthday or rebirth of the sun. People gather at home all night telling stories and reading poetry. They eat fruits and a special dried fruit/nut mix while curled up around a short table called a 'corsi', kept warm by a small charcoal brazier.

These are just some of the traditions of the "Western" world. Celebration of the Solstice is truly a trans-global cross-cultural event.

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We know very little of the solstice celebrations of the Indians of the Americas. The European “discoverers” of these continents did their best to eradicate all traces of indigenous culture and language. The Chumash of coastal southern California leave paintings behind; symbols that represent and honor the Winter Solstice. One of the few cultures that survived relatively intact is that of the Zuni Indian tribe of the American Southwest.

The Zuni begin their year on the winter solstice, with the ceremony called *Yatakya-ittiwanna-quin-techikya* (or "sun middle-at place arrives"), **or** *Tetina-wittwa* (meaning "winter middle"). I prefer the short version.

The “Chief of the Zenith” makes daily prayers and observations of the sun. In the summer and fall he travels two miles each day to the ruins of Matsaki. Standing in a semicircular shrine, he continues this ritual until the sun falls against a specific spot on Corn Mountain, or *Tawa-yalanne*. This marks the beginning of the formal celebration, and continues for the next twenty-one days leading up to the solstice. Every four days, groups of four prayer sticks (always in groups of four) are placed at specific holy sites around the village. Individuals and clan leaders begin making their own prayer sticks four days before the solstice. These are placed into holes dug by the head of the household or clan, and are used to honor the gods and deceased ancestors.

Beginning with the solstice, fire is kept indoors, and no trash is swept from the dwelling for ten days. Ceremonies proceed on specific days, and there are taboos. Talismans representing fertility are made and blessed to bring good crops and fortune. Masked figures perform ceremonial dances to relive the old stories.

The rubbish is carried from the house by the men on the morning of the tenth day, and the ashes and coals are carried in bowls by the women. These are placed side by side, along with glowing embers carefully carried by the children. An ear of corn is placed on the rubbish, and all covered with a sprinkle of corn meal. They chant, "I throw you out, rubbish. In a year you will come back to me as corn."

In Central America, the Spanish burned most of the writings of the Mayan culture as part of their forced conversion of the natives to Christianity. One of the few things that remain is a most remarkable calendar: a calendar that accurately describes astronomical events up to the Winter Solstice of 2021. At that point, after a 5,100 plus year “run”, the Mayan Calendar simply ends.

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There is a “dark rift” within our Milky Way. A collection of interstellar dust blocks our view of the galactic center. This rift has many mythical identities for the Mayans, who were avid astronomers. It is the Black Road; it is the Road to the Underworld; it is the mouth of the Cosmic Monster; it is the birth canal of the First Mother. In mythological terms, the solstice is the birth of First Father (the winter solstice sun) *from* First Mother (the dark-rift in the Milky Way).

Our planet is in motion. The earth rotates in its orbit around the sun, which orbits the Milky Way Galaxy, that hurtles through space away from the Big Bang center of the Universe. The Mayans saw that each new birth of First Father Sun brought him closer to First Mother. On Solstice Day, December 21, 2012, they will finally become one; the apparent position of the sun will transit the Dark Rift of the Milky Way.

Some have said that this remarkable conjunction heralds the end of creation. Perhaps the remarkable thing is that the Mayans accurately forecasted celestial events this far in advance, and well before modern technology existed to prove them correct.

In China, the solstice celebration is called “Dong Zhi” literally means, “arrival of winter”. Dong Zhi has its origins in the year-end harvest celebrations, and usually falls between December 21 and 23. Dong Zhi was once celebrated as the beginning of the new year until Emperor Han Wu Di revised the calendar to a variable Lunar Year. The celebration is deeply rooted in the Chinese belief of yin and yang, which represent balance and harmony in life. The Chinese believe that although the yin qualities of darkness and cold are at their most powerful at this time, it is also a turning point, to herald the dawning of the light and warmth of yang.

Dong Zhi is traditionally celebrated with the preparation of a hot soup dish of glutinous rice flour balls called “tuan yuan” or “soup complete”. Eating this soup on Dong Zhi symbolizes family harmony, unity, and prosperity.

The Japanese Shinto sun goddess, Amaterassu Omikani, ruler of the Plain of Heaven, is the central figure in the Shinto pantheon. The Japanese Imperial family claims descent from her. When her brother, the storm-god Susanowa, ravaged the earth she retreated to a cave because he was so noisy. She closed the cave with a large boulder. Her disappearance deprived the world of light and life, and demons ruled the earth. The other gods used everything in their power to lure her out, but to no avail.

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Uzume, the Japanese goddess of joy and happiness finally succeeded with her comical and obscene dances that made the other gods laugh. Her curiosity aroused, Amaterassu emerged from her cave, allowing the streak of a new dawn to escape. The goddess saw her own brilliant reflection in a mirror that Uzume had hung in a nearby tree. When she drew closer for a better look, the other gods grabbed her and pulled her out of the cave. She returned to the sky, where she has ruled ever since. This is the mythological beginning of the country of Japan.

Our ancestors were intricately tied to the land that sustained them. They had to be. Their very existence depended on planting crops at the right time, and with the proper ceremonies honoring their gods - and the earth. The wonder, mystery and magic of the ancients has been replaced by a new god, the god of Science. Science that tells us the seasons exist because of a 23.44° tilt of the earth's axis. We "wobble" as we spin . . . nothing more, nothing less. An event to be taken for granted, instead of a cause for praise

Yet still, the oldest known celebration of humankind lives on around the world. This singular event forms the basis of many religious archetypes and belief systems, both past and present, when the hope of spring returns to a cold and wintry world.

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