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Birthday Traditions Around The World

A birthday celebration in the U.S.A. is usually a family affair. Whether it is for children or grownups, there is usually a cake. Often, there is the same number of candles on the cake as the age of the person having the birthday. Guests sing a familiar song called *Happy Birthday To You* for the honoree. Guests bring presents for the honoree. The guests may play games for fun or eat cake and ice cream together. It is a very special celebration.

Birthdays are not always celebrated the same way in other countries. Many birthday celebrations are tied to religious days. Others have special traditions that are unique to that particular country.



In Mexico, many children celebrate their birthdays with a piñata. A piñata is a large papier-mâché object formed like an animal or other favorite shape. It is filled with candy and treats. The piñata is hung by a rope from a tree or post. Blindfolded children take turns hitting the piñata with a stick. When the piñata is broken, the treats fall out. The children quickly gather as many goodies as they can.

In China, many citizens celebrate two birthdays. They celebrate one on the solar calendar and one on the lunar calendar. For example, if a boy were born on July 31, 1972, his lunar birthday would fall on June 20. Chinese think that a child's first birthday is a very important event. At this celebration they will put the baby in the center of a group of objects or toys. Whichever item the baby picks up will tell the child's future. For example, if a baby girl picks up a pen, then she will one day become a writer or a scholar. Many Chinese like to eat noodles on their birthdays. That is because they believe that noodles symbolize long life. So for good luck, a bowl of yummy noodles is a must have dish at birthday celebrations!

In Greece, a family celebrates a child's birthday each month after it is born. This continues until the child is a year old. Greek desserts are served at the parties. Some of these are cheese or spinach pie and baklava. Presents are exchanged in much the same way as the American tradition.

In Denmark, flags are flown outside the bedroom window of the person having a birthday. Presents are placed upon a sleeping child's bed. The child will see the presents as soon as he wakes up. There is usually a special celebration for what Danes call "round birthdays." Large parties are organized and lavish entertainment is provided to celebrate a round birthday. These would be the ages of twenty, thirty, forty, and so on.

Barbecues are a mainstay for Australian birthday celebrations. Children eat a special dish called "fairy bread" that is buttered and covered with tiny sprinkles. The sprinkles are called "hundreds and thousands."

One interesting Australian custom is being given a key to the house when a child turns the age of twenty-one.

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The key is said to be the sign of "coming of age," or the transition to adulthood. It means the child is now responsible and will be able to come and go as he or she pleases.

In Africa, a baby's birth is great cause for celebration. In Kenya, a newborn baby is given its name when the mother straps the baby to her back and stands inside a cattle enclosure. The family and villagers all participate in choosing the name.

In many parts of Africa, initiation ceremonies are celebrated instead of birthdays. When children reach a certain age they learn various beliefs, songs, dances, and customs of their tribe.

Egyptian birthday parties are filled with singing and dancing. The parties begin when a child turns one year old. The house is decorated with paper garlands that look like snowflakes. There are many guests at this important occasion so two birthday cakes are provided. One birthday cake has candles and a second one does not. Cookies, sandwiches, and individual cakes called *gateaux* are served along with sesame sticks.

The greeting, "Happy Birthday" has been translated into nearly every language in the world. In Mexico it is "Feliz Cumpleanos." In China it is "Sheng Ri Kuai Le." In Brazil it is "Feliz Aniversario." In France it is "Joyeux Anniversaire." No matter how it is said or how it is celebrated, birthdays are special days for everyone.

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Questions

- _____ 1. Why are birthdays celebrated nearly everywhere around the world?
- Everyone likes presents.
 - It is a legal holiday.
 - Everyone has birthdays.
 - No one works on their birthday.
- _____ 2. What is found at many Mexican birthday celebrations?
- a piñata
 - a swing set
 - a sombrero
 - fireworks
- _____ 3. Which of these birthdays would be considered a "round" birthday?
- age 30
 - age 65
 - age 12
 - age 21

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- _____ 4. In what country is "fairy bread" served at birthday parties?
- A. Australia
 - B. Denmark
 - C. China
 - D. Africa
- _____ 5. In what country is spinach pie served at birthday parties?
- A. Spain
 - B. Greece
 - C. Australia
 - D. Denmark
- _____ 6. In what country are there two birthdays celebrated--one from the solar calendar and one from the lunar calendar?
- A. China
 - B. Denmark
 - C. Mexico
 - D. Greece