

## **International Atlanta: Immigrants add own cultures to Christmas**

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### **Body**

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Gloria Hsu welcomes visitors with a warm hello, guiding them into the room at the Chinese Cultural Center in Chamblee where a dozen people are playing badminton and pingpong.

"Come in, come in," she says. "We are having our **Christmas** party."

There is no **Christmas** tree, no lights, no plastic Santa Claus and no Holy Family adoring the baby Jesus in the manger.

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Instead, the members of the **Atlanta** Senior Chinese Athletic Club have a table filled with homemade foods --- sushi, pickled seaweed, chicken broth, roasted pork and duck.

The party is about goodwill and sharing with friends and family.

**Christmas** as many have come to know it in the United States --- dragging home a tree or pulling a fake one out of a box, the frenzy of last-minute shopping, stuffing cards into envelopes --- is different in many **immigrant** communities in metro **Atlanta**.

Some like the Hsus and their friends embrace the feeling of brotherhood and love. Others, like Mexican Catholics, hold on to the traditions of their homeland. Still others buy into Santa Claus and all the trappings while introducing their children to the traditions they learned as youngsters.

Some Muslims use the holiday to explain to their children the differences and similarities between the religions. And some Buddhists put up **Christmas** trees to share the holiday with friends and family.

For Chinese **immigrants**, religion is a very private thing, explained Mike Hsu, who arrived in **Atlanta** in 1975 from Taiwan with his wife.

The family's first **Christmas** trees --- always small ones --- came with the birth of their children. They knew the children would learn about the holiday from friends and at school.

"Children don't know any other **culture**," Mike Hsu said. "We don't want to hurt their feelings, so we bought a **Christmas** tree for them."

As members of the athletic club were putting down their rackets to share a meal, some 20 miles away, members of the San Felipe de Jesus Catholic Mission in **Atlanta** were gathering for Las Posadas, re-creations of Joseph and Mary's search for a place to stay in Bethlehem.

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The scene is repeated for nine days before **Christmas**. The evenings end with the recitation of the rosary. Children receive bags --- called bolos --- filled with peanuts, cookies and oranges, then gather in the mission's parking lot to break open a pinata. In Mexico and other Latin American countries children receive some of their gifts at midnight on Dec. 25. But it is not Santa Claus who brings them.

"It is the baby Jesus who brings you the gifts," the Rev. Jose Duvan Gonzalez explained to the children. They also receive gifts on Jan. 6, when the Three Wise Men brought gifts to Jesus.

In some families, religious traditions meld.

Pierluigi Mancini, born of Colombian and Italian parents, has an 8-foot artificial **Christmas** tree in his Alpharetta home.

"We have a very, very typical American **Christmas**," said Mancini, whose wife is from upstate New York. The family enjoys dinner at home on **Christmas** Eve and attends Mass the following day.

Still their children, Gabriella, 5, and Julian, 3, get presents on Jan. 6 from Los Tres Reyes Magos --- the Three Wise Men --- like Mancini did when he was growing up in Colombia.

This year his children will probably learn about La Befana, the good witch of Italy, who refused the Magi food and drink. Realizing what she had done, the witch searched for them but to no avail. Now she wanders the world looking for the baby Jesus and leaving good children gifts or candy and bad children lumps of coal.

It isn't just Christians who give a nod to **Christmas**.

Some Muslims use the holiday to teach their children, said Shehla Altaf, a mother of two boys.

Altaf came from Pakistan in 1990 already knowing about **Christmas**. She and her sister had attended Catholic schools back home and her mother's maternity center had Christian workers.

Her sons Shahrukh, 14, and Shahzeb, 8, enjoy the **Christmas** lights, she said.

This year the Islamic holiday Eid-al-Fitr, a three-day celebration marking the end of Ramadan, ended a couple of weeks before **Christmas**. And much like **Christmas**, the holiday is marked by prayer, visits with family and friends, new clothes and gifts.

Her children already understand the Christian view of Jesus as the son of God.

"We all believe in Jesus as a prophet," she said.

The Rameshori Buddhist Center in **Atlanta** has a tree decorated with angels and glass ornaments.

Buddhism easily adapts to local **cultures**, said Gen Kelsang Mondrub, the resident teacher at the center. All of the members of the center are American born. Some members believe Jesus is a spiritual guide, so there is no conflict in the belief systems, he said.

Members of the center will usher in the New Year with prayers for world peace. January, a sacred month, will be marked by daylong meditations and recitations of ancient Sanskrit prayers.

"We respect Christ, but are not followers," said Mondrub, who was raised Episcopalian. "We try to make every day a holy day."

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## Graphic

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Photo:

At San Felipe de Jesus Catholic Mission in Grant Park, the Rev. Jose Duvan Gonzalez (above) blesses a statue of baby Jesus. / SUNNY SUNG / Staff Photo:

**Christmas** takes on an **international** flavor literally and spiritually as Wan Sun Chen (top right) serves food at a Chinese Cultural Center **Christmas** party in Chamblee. At San Felipe de Jesus Catholic Mission in Grant Park, the Rev. Jose Duvan Gonzalez (above) blesses a statue of baby Jesus. / SUNNY SUNG / Staff

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