

The history of popular New Year's traditions

By ThoughtCo, adapted by Newsela staff on 12.20.17

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Image 1: Confetti floats through the air as the new year is rung in Times Square on January 1, 2016 in New York City. Photo by: Andrew Burton/Getty Images.

For many, the start of a new year represents a moment of change. It is a time to reflect on the past. It is also a time to look ahead to what the future might hold. Whether it was a good year or bad, the hope is that better days are ahead.

New Year's is a cause for celebration worldwide. Over the years, people have established various traditions to ring in the next chapter. Here is a look at some favorite traditions from around the globe.

Auld Lang Syne

The official New Year's song in the U.S. is "Auld Lang Syne." It is actually a song from Scotland. In English, "Auld Lang Syne" means "for old times." In the late 1700s, the Scottish began singing the song each New Year's Eve. Friends and family would join hands in a circle. They would move toward the center and back out again as they sang.

The tradition soon spread. Eventually, countries all over the world were ringing in the new year by singing "Auld Lang Syne."



Times Square Ball Drop

One of the most famous New Year's events is the Times Square ball drop. It takes place in New York City. As the clock approaches midnight, a giant sparkly ball is lowered in Times Square. Millions watch every year. But few know about the history of the giant ball. Its connection with the passage of time dates back almost 200 years.

Time balls were first built and used in England in the early 1800s. They were a way for ship captains to tell the time. The balls were large and hung along the coast. They were positioned high in the sky. This way, ships could see them from a distance. At a certain time, the balls were dropped to let captains know that how much time had passed.

In 1907, New York City made it against the law to use fireworks. The New York Times company had to scrap their fireworks celebration. Instead, they built a huge iron and wood "time ball." The first "ball drop" was held on December 31, 1907. The ball was lowered from the flagpole on top of Times Tower.



New Year's Resolutions

The tradition of making New Year's resolutions is an old one. It likely began with the Babylonians about 4,000 years ago. Each year, the Babylonians held a religious festival called Akitu. As part of it, people made resolutions. They wanted to win favor with the gods. So they promised to pay off debts and return borrowed items.

Today, the idea of New Year's resolutions is not as religious. For most people, resolutions are personal goals. Saving money and reducing stress are two popular resolutions.

New Year's Traditions From Around The World

So how does the rest of the world celebrate the new year?

In Greece, people bake a special pie. A coin is hidden inside it. At midnight, the lights are turned off and families begin cutting the pie. Whoever gets the coin is said to have good luck for the entire year.

China, Vietnam and Korea celebrate the lunar new year. This usually falls in February. The Chinese mark the new year by hanging red lanterns. They also give envelopes filled with money. These are tokens of goodwill for the new year.



Islam is one of the world's main religions. Its followers are Muslims. In Muslim countries, the new year is also based on a lunar calendar. It is called "Muharram." The holiday falls on different dates each year. People celebrate by praying at their mosque, or temple.

Importance Of New Year's Traditions

Some New Year's traditions are elaborate, like the ball drop in Times Square. Others are simple, like making resolutions. All of these traditions are about honoring the passage of time. They give us a chance to reflect on the past and look forward to the future.

Quiz

- 1 How does the information in the section "New Year's Resolutions" support the MAIN idea of the article?
 - (A) by highlighting the most common New Year's tradition
 - (B) by explaining the most popular resolutions
 - (C) by comparing and contrasting different traditions
 - (D) by providing the history of an important tradition

- 2 Select the sentence that BEST summarizes the article.
 - (A) New Year's is celebrated in many different ways by people all around the world.
 - (B) "Auld Lang Syne" is the official New Year's song for the United States.
 - (C) The most popular New Year's resolutions are to save money and reduce stress.
 - (D) China, Vietnam and Korea celebrate the lunar new year.

- 3 Read the section "New Year's Traditions From Around The World."
Which answer choice BEST describes the structure of the section?
 - (A) cause and effect
 - (B) compare and contrast
 - (C) sequence of events
 - (D) problem and solution

- 4 Read the first and last paragraphs of the article.
What is the connection between these two paragraphs?
 - (A) Both paragraphs convince the reader to make resolutions.
 - (B) Both paragraphs introduce special New Year's traditions.
 - (C) Both paragraphs highlight the most famous New Year's traditions.
 - (D) Both paragraphs emphasize that New Year's is a meaningful holiday.