

Harvest Festival

A Matter of Life and Death

Question: What celebration is more important than Christmas, New Year, Midsummer or your birthday?
 Answer: The harvest festival.

Why? Without a good harvest you won't live to celebrate Christmas or anything else. No wonder people celebrated the harvest. All over the world, in every civilisation people have thanked the gods for the harvest.

God eats first

In the UK the first wheat that is cut is made into a loaf of bread. This special loaf is taken to the church to be used for the mass. At harvest time people bring fruit and wheat and other food into the churches. Later this is given to poor people.



Turkeys

In 1620 one hundred and two people sailed from England to start a new life in America. Half of them died during the first winter. But in the autumn they had a good harvest. So they had a celebration called Thanksgiving. They invited the local Native Americans to the feast. They came and brought turkeys to add to the feast. Today it is traditional to eat turkey on Thanksgiving Day.



Food house

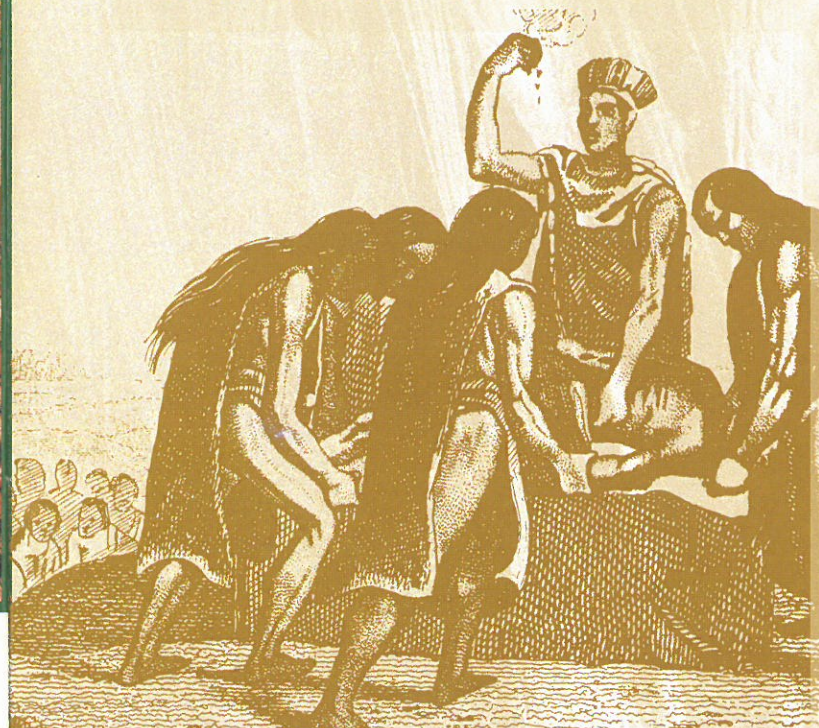
Sukkot is a Jewish harvest festival. Families build little wooden shelters in their gardens. Inside are a table and chairs and lots of food. For seven or eight days people go into the shelters to eat and pray.

Eating the moon

In China at harvest time there is the festival of the Moon Goddess. Families go to the nearest hilltop. There they light their lanterns and watch the full moon rise. Then they eat special moon-shaped cakes. These are called mooncakes.

The gods want blood!

Not all ceremonies were so pleasant. Some pagan ceremonies for getting a good harvest were violent.



In Scandinavia the statue of the earth goddess, Nethus, had to be washed in a holy lake. That was the easy part! When the statue was clean the people who had washed it had to throw themselves into the lake and drown!

The Aztecs of Peru were even more violent. During the ceremony for the Sun God a man was carried up the steps of a pyramid. At the top a priest cut him open. The priest took out the man's beating heart and held it up to the sun. Then the dead body was thrown down the steps. All this would make the Sun God happy!

Rain dance

Sometimes farmers worry that there is not enough rain. Long ago if it was too dry many Native American tribes did rain dances. They believed that if the dance was correctly performed rain would fall.

It's a pity British people don't have a sun dance to improve the English summer.

