



1st Arsakeio-Tositseio of Ekali, Athens

**CHRISTMAS CUSTOMS FROM
OUR COUNTRY**

GREECE

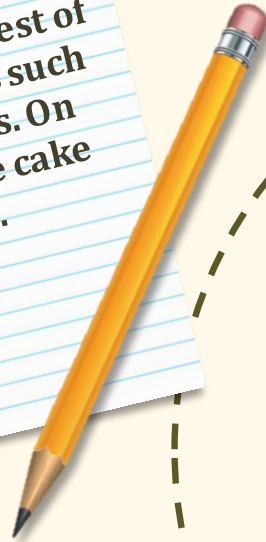




The period from Christmas Eve, 24th December, to 'Fota', 6th January, is full of customs, traditions and legends of our country. Some of these customs are presented below.

Christmas cake

On Christmas Eve the housewives knead the 'Christmas cake' with great care. They use flour, rose water, honey, sesame, cinnamon and cloves. In the middle of the cake they put a walnut, make a cross with dough and on the rest of its surface they make shapes such as flowers, leaves and birds. On Christmas Day they cut the cake giving lots of wishes.



Christmas pastries

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The traditional Christmas pastries in Greece are: 'kourabiedes', 'melomakarona', 'diples' and 'loukoumades'.

'Melomakarona' are dipped into honey and are sprinkled with chopped walnuts and cinnamon.



'Kourabiedes' have pure butter, almonds and powdered sugar. Sugar symbolizes the snowy mountains of winter.



'Diples' are made of dough sheet, fried in hot oil and sprinkled with honey and cinnamon.



Christmas tree



The Christmas Tree is a foreign custom which was first introduced in Greece by King Otto -Othonas- 185 years ago. But it was after World War 2 that the custom was loved by and became very popular with the Greek people. Although originally from Germany and Scandinavia, the custom of the decoration of the Christmas Tree spread around Europe and soon became part of the local culture and Christmas tradition of every Greek household.

The use of evergreen boughs as Christmas decorations for the house is, however, also found in ancient Greek feasts and/or festivals. In fact, in the present days, the landlord of each household on some islands of the Cyclades hangs a bough of wood- mainly from olive trees- up on the house entrance to stay there throughout the whole year. Others use wild onion bulbs or branches from a thorny briar bush - pournari- to protect the house and the family in it from evil spirits.



Onion bulbs on house entrance




The Yule Log or 'Chrestoxylo' in Greek

In some villages of northern Greece, people burn a massive log in the name of Christ - called 'Chrestoxylo' in Greek - and keep it burning for twelve days, from Christmas Eve (December 24th) up to Epiphany Day (January 6th). The burning of the Yule Log keeps Baby Christ warm in the cave and it also protects the house and the family from evil spirits, the naughty and wicked hobgoblins called 'kallikantzaroi' from entering the house.





Christmas Greek Carols or 'Kalanda' in Greek



On Christmas Eve, as well as New Year's Eve, groups of children walk around the streets and neighbourhoods early in the morning to ring the bells of houses and ask to sing Christmas carols - called 'Kalanda' in Greek. In pure joy and with the help of a musical triangle they sing and narrate of Christ's Birth on Christmas Eve and of the coming of Santa Claus on New Year's Eve and on both days they give praise and wishes to the lord of the house and his family for each and every household.

Christmas carolers are welcome everywhere they go and are offered sweets and/or money as a symbolic treat.



The vasilopita

On the first day of the New Year the landlord of each house cuts the vasilopita which the wife has prepared with lots of care and love. It looks like a cake and it is dusted with powdered sugar. The landlady hides a coin inside the cake and whoever finds it, is lucky and blessed.

According to custom, Agios Vasileios from Caesaria was responsible for the vasilopita and he was the one who found a trick to give away money to poor people: he hid coins in the cakes and he offered them to the poor. This explains the coin we put in the vasilopita so that one and only lucky person can win!!!



Kalikantzari... (Folk legend)

Really, have you ever heard of the kalikantzari?

People say that every night from Christmas Eve till the Epiphany, on January 6th, the kalikantzari roam the streets and houses. They are unsightly, ugly creatures with lots of faults: short as a dwarf or tall and skinny, one donkey leg and one human. They've got long nails, untidy hair and red eyes. Throughout the year they live under the surface of the Earth in the underworld, envious of those who live up above.



Kalikantzari... (Folk legend)



They walk around the streets, climb on roofs and break into houses through the chimney. They mess with the ashes, scatter flour all over the place, eat pancakes and make people dance non-stop. But every year they leave on the day of Epiphany, frightened, yet singing and mocking. When they get back to the underworld, they discover that the columns of the Earth are as good as new, so they start sawing all over again!