

**Exchange at Christmas:
An Anthropological Perspective**
(Chicago style. British English)

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Course

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In the Christian world, Christmas represents a happy time of year when presents are exchanged and there are festivities. These social activities are generally embraced even by those people who do not believe in Christ or even God but have been brought up in the Christian tradition or live in a predominantly Christian society.

For kids growing up in the fifties, Christmas came as a break from the general gloom of post-war Britain. It was a joyful time when we could look forward to presents. We were not expected to reciprocate; we were only expected to be grateful that we had received the gifts. I remember one Christmas when my parents gave me a box of dark chocolates, not knowing that I preferred milk chocolates. Of course, I felt the obligation to accept them gracefully, but that meant that, for the next few years, I was destined to receive the same unappreciated present. Little did I know that I was acting in accordance with one of the unwritten rules of social intercourse. As we grew up, we began to develop the idea that maybe we could give presents to others, although our meagre pocket money would not stretch far. The notion that Christmas was not only about receiving gifts but also of giving then became ever more solid as we grew older. Growing up we never thought that we were in any sense participating in some kind of ritual. We always knew that Christmas should have been about celebrating the birth of Christ, but in a materialistic world where Christianity as a belief system is much weaker than it was before the modern era, we were content to enjoy the festivities and the presents without worrying too much about the reason for them.

History and anthropology reveal that the activities of giving and receiving are not limited to specific cultures or times. Marcel Mauss' book, *The Gift*, which was published in French in 1925, is a study of gifts and exchanges in 'primitive' societies. In it, he suggests that giving and receiving form an activity which is so fundamental it may be a characteristic which is innate in all human beings. Mauss describes the obligations that accompany the practice of giving: the obligation to give gifts (whoever gives shows generosity, and therefore

deserves respect); the obligation to receive them (whoever receives shows respect for the giver and also shows generosity); and the obligation to repay the gift (thus demonstrating that the honour of the recipient is at least equivalent to the honour of the original giver).² We might look at our Christmas and recognize that these three obligations are present. Children are usually only on the receiving end, but one can argue that good behaviour is a form of repayment. In the American tradition, 'Santa' makes a list of those who are 'naughty and nice', which suggests that good behaviour is a precondition for the receipt of presents and also repayment for the presents. Presents could then depend on reciprocity, but exchange also implies a set of unwritten rules regarding the appropriateness of the exchanges – you don't give 10-year-old an automatic assault weapon for Christmas unless you are a fully paid-up member of the National Rifle Association. And as children turn into adults, they may be expected to take care of their parents.

Mauss believed that exchange was something essential to human nature. To demonstrate this conviction, he wrote about the exchange of gifts in different cultures: potlatch, in North-Western America; exchanges in the Kula ring; and exchanges in Indian and Melanesian festivals. The important point is that he explores the hidden meanings behind the exchanges of presents and the ceremonies which accompanied them. The potlatch were social ceremonies practiced by Native American tribes of the North-Western seaboard and given by a host to establish or strengthen their social standing. In the potlatch, the guests are invited to attend a meal and receive gifts or payment. During the ceremony of the Kwakiutl tribe, the hosts would make a display of destroying their property to show their superior social status towards their rivals. The Kula involved exchanges of apparently worthless objects such as sea shells, but these exchanges meant that those involved would have to row many miles between

2. Marcel Mauss, *The Gift: Forms and Functions of Exchange in Archaic Societies*, trans. Ian Cunnison (London: Cohen & West, 1966).

islands in order to carry them out, and the value of the objects seems to have been linked to knowledge of their previous owners. Mauss draws these two forms of exchanges together and looks for their common grounds, but although Mauss' work may seem somewhat contrived – the potlatch and Kula exchanges have very little in common – he put his finger on a key aspect of anthropology, namely the way in which social practices, often unwritten social practices, contribute towards local social cohesion.³

Anthropology, traditionally, concentrated on the activities of humans living in 'primitive' cultures, so it was natural for Mauss and others to focus on gift exchanges in remote tribal settings. But it is easy to see how a reading of these exchanges and the obligations associated with them could be applied to more modern settings. Christmas is only one example where exchange reinforces social bonds. We should also mention, among other things, birthdays or other social gatherings where reciprocity is expected, for example, invitations to dine out or, in alcohol drinking societies, to have a drink at the local bar. And where Malinovsky stressed that ownership of Kula objects might be linked to personal fame,⁴ we might argue that present-day status, or 'street cred', is often linked to the ownership of relatively worthless objects acquired through exchange. In the US, for example, baseball cards seem to be a mark of prestige. Memorabilia acquires value often because it belonged to someone before: How much would a lock of Elvis Presley's hair fetch if it were to be sold on eBay? Money is the obvious mechanism for exchange in advanced societies but, if we recognize that the Kula objects had little value in themselves, the acquisition of apparently worthless objects in advanced societies follows the same principle.

3. Thomas Hylland Eriksen, *What Is Anthropology?* (Pluto Press, 2004), 86.

4. Bronislaw Malinowski, *Argonauts of the Western Pacific; an Account of Native Enterprise and Adventure in the Archipelagoes of Melanesian New Guinea* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1922), 98, <http://archive.org/details/argonautsofweste00mali>.

Children and most adults do not think anthropologically or sociologically; they act subjectively and take decisions based on the way they interpret what is happening around them. Most do not see the bigger picture and, unless they have a special interest in the social sciences, will continue to behave subjectively without ever imagining that their behaviour could form part of a pattern of social relationships which, though not entirely predictable, is at least so in part. So, when we step back and look at the bigger picture, we start to see that what my family and friends did was also being done by other people in other places and at other times. Although 25th December is celebrated as a Christian festival, it was not always so. Before the birth of Christ, *Dies Natalis Solis Invicti* (the birth of the sun) was celebrated on 25th December in the Roman Empire, and we know that it was only in the middle of the 4th century, well after Constantine's conversion to Christianity, that Christmas began to be celebrated on the same day.⁵ It partially replaced the pagan festival of the Kalends, the festival celebrating the first day of the month. Clement Miles describes the festivities associated with the Kalends as involving a great deal of celebration where a 'stream of presents pours itself out on all sides'.⁶

Anthropology provides us with a perspective of exchange which does not limit us to the economic notions of how markets work. Human beings are not just self-interested beings who wish to maximize benefits while minimizing losses. This seems to be the message not only of Mauss but of later economists with anthropological leanings such as Polanyi and Sahlins.⁷ In other words, these anthropological insights into human exchanges do not hinge on a strictly economic view of social relations. If rewards were only monetary, there would

5. Daniel Miller, 'Christmas: An Anthropological Lens,' *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 7, no. 3 (December 1, 2017): 412, <https://doi.org/10.14318/hau7.3.027>.

6. Clement Miles, *Christmas in Ritual and Tradition* (1912), quoted in Miller, 411.

7. Eriksen, *What Is Anthropology?*

be no way to explain altruism: Why do some people take more delight in giving than in receiving? Why do some people give up their comfortable lives to help complete strangers in underdeveloped countries? The rewards they receive are not financial and may lead to the loss of their own lives. Anthropology suggests answers to these questions.

Anthropology teaches us that exchange is not just about the profit motive. It teaches us that there are many different types of exchanges that involve both written and unwritten rules, and that there are common threads among them. We learn from anthropologists that the !Kung turn their noses up at generous presents because the giver is assumed to be arrogantly claiming a position of power over the other members of the tribe,⁸ and that the Turkana expected their presents of pots to be filled with maize.⁹ The unwritten rules of Christmas exchanges are different in different cultures. Unlike the !Kung and the Turkana, the British are not expected to turn up their noses at the Christmas present, but there is an unwritten obligation to thank the giver and, when possible, repay the gift in some form or other.

8. Richard Borshay Lee, 'Eating Christmas in the Kalahari,' *Natural History*, 1969.

9. Lee Cronk, 'Reciprocity and the Power of Giving,' in *Conformity and Conflict: Readings in Cultural Anthropology*, ed. David W. McCurdy and James Spradley, 14th ed. (Pearson, 2012), 121.

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