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### Comparison of Christmas Rituals

With the Christmas season right around the corner, it's only fitting to learn more about other cultures' ways of celebrating Christmas. From an American's point of view, Christmas is a Christian celebration of the birth of their savior Jesus Christ surrounded by the merriment of snow, santa, elves, gift-giving, and gathering. The most prominent modern way of celebrating this event has two parts (1) parents giving their children wrapped gifts on December 25th as the character Santa Claus and (2) religious celebration centered around remembrance and prayer. Recently, I've heard of young adults with jobs and college educations just past of their teenage years emphasizing their Christmas lists and it's importance in receiving the gifts they *particularly* want. To me, this seems to be ridiculous to expect a sea of endless gifts when you can support yourself. It's a nice gesture to give gifts, but I have problems with expecting certain ones under threat of being mad if they don't get the right ones. We'll look at three countries Norway, Mexico, and Ethiopia specifically because they are heavily Christian countries and because they represent developed, developing, and under-developed countries, respectively, based on their human development index. We'll analyze and compare Norway, Mexico, and Ethiopia to the United States' and see if this gift-giving trend transcends all cultures.

#### Norway

Norway is 86.2% Christian by population. It is the most developed of the three countries. On the evening of December 25th, a night usually covered in snow, Santa Claus, julenissen, arrives with gifts. In the days between Christmas and New Years Eve, called romjulen, the

children sometimes go from house to house in the afternoon asking for sweets, this tradition is called julebukk, meaning "Christmas buck" in English. The tradition originates from Viking times when pagans worshipped Thor and his goat. In Viking times, a person dressed in goatskin, carrying a goat head would burst into a party and during the night "die" then return to life. Now this tradition is practiced most prominently parallel to American's Trick or Treating. Norway, in its developed state, emphasizes gift-giving to family and neighbors much like the United States.

### Mexico

Mexico is 92.0% Christian by population and a developing country. Mexicans share many traditions with the Spanish. Santa Claus is the season's predominant gift-giving aficionado, but his bright red suit is represented in the traditional flower of the season. This flower is the poinsettia, which has a brilliant red star-shaped bloom. On Christmas day the children are blindfolded and taken to try and break a decorated clay piñata that dangles and swings at the end of a rope. Once the piñata has been broken, the children clamber to recover the candy that was inside the piñata. The children who have been good receive a gift on January 6th from the Three Wise Men. In the northern states of Mexico Santa Clause "Santo Clos" brings children big presents, and the "Reyes Magos" bring the small presents in January. In the southern states the gift giving is inverted and "El niño Dios" (Jesus) brings a few presents, while "Los Reyes Magos" (the 3 wise men) bring the equivalent of Santa Clause's presents. The Mexican Christmas season is joyously extended up until the nativity scene is put away, February 2nd. Along with gift giving and piñatas, Mexican families enjoy sweetbread decorated with candied fruit called "Rosca de Reyes," hot chocolate, and tamales. Mexican culture emphasizes food, gift-giving, and extended-family gathering very similarly to the United States. On February 2nd,

the family puts on a dinner of delicious tamales and hot chocolate is served with great love and happiness to celebrate the end of the season.

### Ethiopia

Ethiopia is 63.4% Christian by population. The Ethiopian Christmas known as Ganna is celebrated on January 7th. Food served on Christmas usually includes a sourdough pancake-like bread called injera complemented by Doro wat, a spicy chicken stew might be the main meal. Baskets decorated beautifully are used to serve the wat wherein the injera is used as a scoop to eat the wat. Gift giving is a very small part of Christmas celebration. Children usually receive very simple presents such as clothing.

On January 6th, Christmas Eve, the city crowds with pilgrims from all parts of the country. They remain outdoors all night, praying and chanting. In the morning, a colorful procession makes its way to a nearby hilltop where a service is held. Three young men march at the head of the crowd, lashing whips from left to right to keep the people in line. Those who worship are fed with bread and wine that has been blessed by priests. After the service is over the rest of the day is spent dancing, playing sport and feasting.

### Analysis

It's apparent that all three counties celebrate Christmas similarly. Each culture has elements of social gathering, feasting on cultural food, prayer, and gift giving. As obvious as it seems, the developing and developed countries, i.e. Norway and Mexico, put more cultural emphasis on gift-giving far more than developing countries, Ethiopia. Ethiopian culture emphasizes strong religious following, public gatherings, and slightly unimpressive food. What I found most noteworthy is the public gathering and all-night celebrations closely followed by

intense spiritual ceremonies. Ethiopia is the only country that meets and celebrates publicly and limits gift giving to the essentials. With this in mind, the United States seems to have a very odd sense of entitlement when it comes to gift-receiving when compared to the very religious-focused celebration found in Ethiopia. This entitlement may stem from the United States' long-standing developed nature and prosperity allowing for adults raised with the same sense of entitlement during the holidays to see the newer generations entitlement as normal and therefore unchecked. Similarly to the United States, the Mexican "Santo Clos" gifts large gifts to children followed by a multitude of smaller gifts; even Norway has a night where a Santa-like-figure delivers gifts to children. The abundance of cultural gift-giving seen in 3 of the 4 countries we've looked at makes me think that the sense of entitlement in the United States is simply a manifestation of consumerism into newer generations that were born into an era of advertising and hyper-consumerism. Expecting gifts seems normal, given the standard set in so many cultures, so the American expectation may not be an extreme example of gift-giving given the standards of the children. Norwegian and Mexican.

### Conclusion

Sifting through the cultural differences among developed, developing, and under-developed countries' cultural celebrations of Christmas has made me realize that each celebration should be examined with context of the norms and status quo of the society it falls within. Obviously poorer countries can't give more gifts and will emphasis togetherness and food, whereas more privileged countries can generally afford more gifts and time together. The question isn't, "Is obsessive gift giving weird?" because weirdness is completely subjective and relevant to the culture in which the question is being asked about. So America's "excessive" gift

giving is only weird to those who don't identify with that norm and priorities. It's not weird, it's just different.

## References

*Christmas in United States of America.* <http://www.santas.net/americanchristmas.htm>

*Christmas in Norway.* <http://www.santas.net/norwegianchristmas.htm>

*Christmas in Mexico.* <http://www.santas.net/mexicanchristmas.htm>

*Christmas in Ethiopia.* <http://www.santas.net/ethiopianchristmas.htm>