



UNEDITED

Christmas

An anthropological lens

Daniel MILLER, *University College of London*

Why does the festival of Christmas appear to be expanding worldwide while other festivals decline? Why do people emphasize their local rituals, given this is a global festival? Is this a religious festival whose values have been destroyed by materialism? What is the relationship between this family celebratory meal and the divine family to which it pays obeisance? These seemed to be questions that lent themselves to an anthropological perspective. For this reason in 1993 I brought together an edited volume *Unwrapping Christmas*, which was published by Oxford University Press. For that collection I also obtained permission from Claude Lévi-Strauss to include the first translation of his paper “Le Pere Noël supplicié.” Subsequently, on request from Suhrkamp Verlag, who had published several of my books in German, I submitted the following manuscript as part of their launch of a series of more popular academic works in a digital edition. This is the first publication of the manuscript in English.

Keywords: Christmas, family, kinship, consumption, materialism

Introduction

I have always believed that the main role of the anthropologist is not too tell us what we have been, but to provide insights into what we are becoming. In this volume, I will explore issues that arise from the history of Christmas since these establish the structures and traditions that underlie the festival, but we will then move on to suggest that Christmas is perhaps more important today than it has ever been. It provides many insights into the core ambivalence of the modern world with respect

This is a previously unpublished English version of a short book that was published in German. *Weihnachten: Das global Fest.* edition suhrkamp digital. Berlin: Suhrkamp Verlag, 2011.



This work is licensed under the Creative Commons | © Daniel Miller.
ISSN 2049-1115 (Online). DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.14318/hau7.3.027>

to who we think we have become. Specifically, I will argue that Christmas has become central to three of the most important struggles that define being modern. The first is our relationship to family and kinship, the topic that was always at the heart of anthropology. A second is the problem of how we reconcile our desire to be citizens of the globe in its entirety without losing our sense of the specifics of local origins, or relation to the places we come from. And the third is our problematic relationship to mass consumption and materialism. I shall end with an attempt to construct a general theory of Christmas that combines these ethnographic observations of contemporary Christmas with the earlier historical materials.

It is not surprising that an anthropologist should be drawn to the study of Christmas. As a discipline, we have always been interested in the study of ritual including seasonal festivals. But one of the reasons that anthropologists tend to cede territory to sociology when it comes to contemporary Europe is that it seems that our core interests such as ritual and kinship have been in decline. Most of the festivals and rites that were once celebrated have at least in the more metropolitan areas practically disappeared. By contrast Christmas has been the one festival that has secured official backing and increasing commercial attention, so that today it is as though all the other festivals had been emptied out and replaced by this one last celebration that now stands as the symbol of the very idea of an annual festival. Furthermore, Christmas has grown in global terms to be celebrated in many countries that are not Christian and had no previous Christmas tradition. Yet that very success, and especially its embrace by modern commerce, has made Christmas suspect. We tend to assume that Christmas has lost its authenticity and soul precisely by compromising with these commercial aspects of modernity. But as we shall discover in this volume, the relationship to commerce is both more complex and a good deal more interesting.

My main experience as an ethnographer of Christmas has been through fieldwork in the island of Trinidad in the Caribbean. Therefore, after the initial discussion of the history of Christmas I will take these three key concerns, the family, the local and the global, and then materialism. In each case I will discuss these more generally, especially looking at evidence from England which is where I live, and then as a counterpoint consider how these three issues are played out in Trinidad. Much of the material presented here was originally published as part of a book *Unwrapping Christmas* (Miller 1993a, 1993b, Ed. 1993) and I will refer to essays by other anthropologists that contributed to that volume as well as some more recent publications.

Aspects of the history of Christmas

The origins of Christmas

Given that this is only a short discussion and the issue of history are largely intended as background I will deal briefly with only two periods—the origins of the festival in Roman times, and the development of contemporary Christmas. Some of the missing period between will be discussed as part of my discussion of the relationship to the family in the next section (see Rycenga 2008 for a summary of



the ambivalence in Christianity towards Christmas). I first felt persuaded that the evidence of earlier periods should be considered as more than just a background to the modern Christmas when I encountered the following quotation from Miles's (1912) volume, *Christmas in Ritual and Tradition*. Miles is quoting (via an intermediary source) from Libanius, a non-Christian philosopher of rhetoric at Constantinople, Nicomedia, and Antioch, who was writing in the second half of the fourth century, the time in which Christmas is first established. The description is of the festival of the Kalends which, is one of the three festivals that Christmas in some sense replaces:

The festival of the Kalends, is celebrated everywhere as far as the limits of the Roman Empire extend . . . Everywhere may be seen carousals and well-laden tables; luxurious abundance is found in the houses of the rich, but also in the houses of the poor better food than usual is put upon the table. The impulse to spend seizes everyone. He who the whole year through has taken pleasure in saving and piling up his pence, becomes suddenly extravagant. He who erstwhile was accustomed and preferred to live poorly, now at this feast enjoys himself as much as his means will allow. . . . People are not only generous towards themselves, but also towards their fellow-men. A stream of presents pours itself out on all sides . . . The highroads and footpaths are covered with whole processions of laden men and beasts . . . As the thousand flowers which burst forth everywhere are the adornment of Spring, so are the thousand presents poured out on all sides, the decorations of the Kalends feast. It may justly be said that it is the fairest time of the year. . . . The Kalends festival banishes all that is connected with toil, and allows men to give themselves up to undisturbed enjoyment. From the minds of young people it removes two kinds of dread: the dread of the schoolmaster and the dread of the stern pedagogue. The slave also it allows, as far as possible, to breathe the air of freedom . . . Another great quality of the festival is that it teaches men not to hold too fast to their money, but to part with it and let it pass into other hands. (Miles 1912: 168–9)

The importance of this quotation is much enhanced by the evidence presented in the next three pages of Miles' work. Miles first notes how "The church's denunciations of pagan festal practices in the winter season are mainly directed against the Kalends celebrations and show into how many regions the keeping of the feast had spread" (ibid.: 169). He quotes a source who collected forty such denunciations dated from between the fourth and eleventh centuries, which suggests that a direct relationship between Christmas and the Kalends is acknowledged for nearly a millennium. Quoting one such denunciation in full he mentions additional practices, such as masquerading, which we now identify more with Carnival, but also the feasting, drinking, and the giving of presents still associated with Christmas.

The origins of Christmas are, however, more complex than just this rivalry with the Kalends. The Kalends, at least in earlier Roman times, is much less important than the Saturnalia, which was celebrated from December 17 for five days. This is noted by Scullard (1981: 205–7) as the most popular Roman festival in republican times. In this festival we see many elements repeated in medieval and later

Christmas and Carnival celebrations, including not only the general jollity but also such specific elements as the choosing of a mock king to preside over the revels and the giving of presents. Scullard even mentions the wearing of soft (though felt rather than paper!) hats. We also see rituals dedicated to the reversal of social norms. Here is where we find the master feasting the slave which, as Libanius makes clear, is merely the most extreme example of a sense of inversion from ordinary norms.

The relationship between these two Roman festivals is such that we seem to be dealing with a particular phenomena, a sort of twin peaked festival, which in turn is reflected in the dual emergence of Christmas on the one hand but also Carnival on the other, or sometimes New Year. Between them we see feasting and gambling, present-giving, lavishness, and the spending of money generally. Yet what is noteworthy is the attitude of figures such as Libanius noted by Miles. Mostly Libanius is a conservative moralist who celebrates what he saw as traditional Roman values including thrift. Yet he seems to see nothing to condemn on this one particular occasion, though this is exactly the behaviour which he on every other occasion would condemn as the very opposite of the virtues he so wishes to preserve. Indeed, many previous moralists had condemned what they saw as the noise and excesses of Saturnalia. The gift-giving and lavishness that Libanius describes could easily be viewed as part of a general rise of crass materialism amongst the Roman elite in particular, and as such a threat to traditional values.

The parallels between the circumstances of the original Christmas and our contemporary Christmas may be extended if we consider the third pre-Christian festival connected to Christmas. This is the celebration of the Dies Natalis Solis Invicti on December 25. Miles notes that it is this festival which seems to be deliberately replaced in order to provide a calendrical fixity to Christmas, but then suggests that there is no importance to be attached to it. In this case, however, the formidable scholar of Christmas may have missed something, which is borne out by a subsequent monograph on the cult associated with this event. The Dies Natalis Solis Invicti were celebrated with chariot racing and decorations of branches and small trees, as part of a cult called Deus Sol Invictus. Halsberghe (1972) traces the development of this cult from its origins in Syria (and possibly before that in pre-Jewish Canaanite practices). It is taken to Rome originally in the more Syrian form of Sol Invictus Elagabal in 219. It briefly dominates Roman worship until the murder of the supporting emperor in 222. The cult spreads, however, and is then re-established in a more “Roman” form by the emperor Aurelian, to be proclaimed the dominant religion of the Roman state in 274. The cult continues in its importance thereafter. Halsberghe notes that “It was during the rule of Constantine the Great (306–37) that the cult of Deus Sol Invictus reached extraordinary heights, so that his reign was even spoken of as a Sun Emperorship” (ibid.: 167).

Constantine was, of course, also responsible for the subsequent promotion of Christianity, which was to replace such cults. With this background information we are better able to appreciate the grounds for a decision that took place between the years 354 and 360 to establish the festival of Christmas on the date of December 25, which later on successfully replaced in the West an earlier tradition in the East that focused on the Epiphany of January 6. It was not merely that this was the date given in the Julian calendar for the winter solstice, but it meant replacing a key festival of a cult that was probably the main rival to Christianity in its earliest phase. This



may be even more the case with the worship of Mithras closely associated with the Roman Empire. Mithras was also said to have been born on December 25 (Nabarz 2005: 48), and Mithraism was later ruthlessly crushed by Christianity throughout the Empire. All these cults emerged from the Middle East and were probably seen not just as rivals but as closely related (Barnes 1981, Class 2000). The cult of the sun god (despite its polytheistic origins) had by then also become a form of monotheism derived from Syrian origins, and may have shared the Mithraic and Christian concerns with a redeemer and the afterlife. Unlike its two rivals, however, the cult of Deus Sol Invictus, from its earliest introduction to the Roman Empire, enjoyed a much closer relationship to the state and the presence and image of the emperor, which gave it considerable political appeal.

All of this sounds like rather obscure and esoteric archaeological digging into the early foundations of Christmas—surely only of antiquarian interest. Yet I hope I have already revealed a whole series of curious analogies with our own contemporary Christmas and also of Carnival. I am not going to spoil my story by telling you at this stage why I think this gives us key clues as to the nature of our contemporary Christmas, and that already we have here the building blocks towards a more general theory of Christmas. Like in a good detective story, I have simply laid out a few early clues, but how exactly we should bring these in as evidence for my case—for that you will have to wait until the end of this volume.

The origins of the modern Anglo-American Christmas

In total contrast to this evidence from Roman times, a consensus appears to be emerging around the interpretation of at least the contemporary Anglo-American Christmas which would place this festival firmly within the more general category of phenomenon termed “the invention of tradition” that is something that claims links with an ancient past but is really an almost entirely new festival. This theme is certainly prominent in the most important accounts of the modern Christmas, those by Barnett (1954) on the American Christmas and by Golby and Purdue (1986) and Pimlott (1978) on the British Christmas. In addition, these writers provide useful summaries of the longer historical traditions from which the modern Christmas emerged. Barnett is especially interesting in his account of the opposition to Christmas amongst the Puritan founders of modern America, who went so far as to make the celebration of Christmas illegal during parts of the seventeenth century (as did the British Puritan parliament between 1647 and 1660).

Perry (2010: 2) makes a very similar argument with respect to Germany. Notwithstanding the appearance of an ancient and venerable set of origins, he claims that actually the German Christmas was largely a re-invention of the nineteenth century. Many of the writers who follow this reinvention of tradition argument emphasize the break in the mid-nineteenth century between any previous version of this festival and the Christmas we know today. Amongst the most persuasive evidence for a radical distinction in Britain corresponding, is that presented by Golby (1981: 14–15) based on a survey of *The Times* newspaper from 1790 to 1836: “In twenty of the forty-seven years, Christmas is not mentioned at all, and for the remaining twenty-seven years reports are extremely brief and not very informative.”

This relative lack of concern for the festival is contrasted with the extraordinary influence of the author Charles Dickens and especially the tremendous popularity of his book *A Christmas Carol*. Barnett credits Dickens and some other authors such as Washington Irving with the development of what he calls the “carol philosophy” with its emphasis upon sentimentality.

The notion of the invention of tradition seems borne out by the persuasive tenor of Dickensian nostalgia about the festival which clearly purports to be enacting a rite of considerable antiquity. Yet it is only from this point in the mid-nineteenth century that we start to find the crystallization of a range of attributes of the modern Christmas from diverse regional sources into a single homogenized version which has no regional base. This syncretic modern form extracts the Christmas tree from the German tradition, the filling of stockings from the Dutch tradition, the development of Santa Claus mainly from the United States, the British Christmas card, and many other such elements. Folkloristic accounts of Christmas indicate that up to this time the festival is so permeated by specific local elements that it presents a picture of quite spectacular heterogeneity. But in the mid-nineteenth century we see the stripping away of certain customs and the reinforcement of those selected for preservation. For example, mistletoe is enshrined with its associated ritual of kissing, while ivy, equally important in some earlier traditions, diminishes in significance.

The implications of these findings are given still greater significance by the evidence from the subsequent period. It has been argued that once the disparate elements are woven into the modern form this becomes a largely stable concoction with relatively little change occurring over the last century. Despite the tremendous dynamism of popular culture over the twentieth century, it is argued that Christmas has been relatively little altered. Rather each new medium has attempted to appropriate it, as we find with Christmas films or Christmas pop music (see papers in Whiteley ed. 2008). The main modern controversy has been whether the most powerful of these new forces, that of commerce, has been so successful in its appropriation as to overturn and then destroy the spirit of Christmas celebrated by Dickens. This question dominated Barnett’s analysis and remains the main colloquial debate over Christmas.

Weightman and Humphries provide perhaps the most extreme example of this view, since most of the content of their book is devoted to exemplifying their initial proposition that “the Christmas ritual which we know today was the ‘invention’ of the relatively well-to-do Victorian middle class, and reflects their preoccupations” (1987: 15). The weight of modern scholarship has defined with increasing precision the period and place we should have to explore if we are to comprehend the causes behind the current scale and specific nature of contemporary Christmas.

Once these now established attributes are in place and increasingly formed in the new images of industrial popular culture, we see the final triumph of the modern Christmas in their global spread. This occurs partly through the influence of American troops in the Second World War, partly through the older influence of British colonialism. It occurs despite the open resistance from a range of European national traditions which opposed the hegemonic force of the Anglo-American version of the festival. By the 1990s we are faced with the extraordinary



phenomenon of a global festival which seems to grow in its accumulated rituals and the extravagance of the homage paid to it, even as all other festivals and comparable events have declined.

So we have two entirely different historical foundations. One suggesting deep roots back into Roman times. The other implying that the modern Christmas is really just something put together in the mid-nineteenth century. There is a danger however in the contrast between the two parts of this historical investigation. The excavation of the Roman origins of Christmas suggest all sorts of interesting structural elements of inversion and cosmology. By contrast this brief excursion into the origins of the contemporary Anglo-American Christmas suggest just a hodge-podge of all sort of different elements thrown together without any such structure and without cosmological significance. But just before we assume any such difference let us end this historical discussion with a more detailed consideration of just one element of the contemporary Anglo-American Christmas, its single most importance symbol today, that is Santa Claus.

Russell Belk (1993) provides a very helpful history and structural analysis of the figure of Santa Claus. His origins lie with the Christian figure of Saint Nicola the fourth century Bishop of Myra (in present day Turkey) patron saint of sailors and pawnbrokers. Though as Belk notes there are also influences from many other European traditions including the French Père Noël and the Dutch Sinterklaas though there are many differences (ibid.: 77–78) and the key elements of Santa Claus are really developed in nineteenth century United States. “These include Clement Moore’s 1822 poem ‘A Visit from St Nicolas’...Thomas Nast’s drawings of Santa Claus which appeared in Harper’s Weekly between 1863 and 1886. Sundblom’s portraits for Coca Cola advertising beginning in 1931 were refinements on these themes” (ibid.: 79). Gradually we see the development of the modern iconography associated with the reindeer, the red and white costume, and the North Pole. But perhaps most fascinating is Belk’s analysis of the analogies but also structural inversions of the figure of Christ (ibid.: 82–3). In common with Jesus, Santa Claus is associated with miracles, omniscience, gifts, and prayers (or at least prayers for gifts). On the other hand, Jesus comes from the Middle East, Santa Claus from the North Pole; Jesus is young and thin, Santa Claus is old and fat; Jesus is serious, Santa is jolly; Jesus is dressed in humble white, Santa in rich reds and furs; Jesus condemns materialism and Santa gives toys and luxuries, but also indulgencies such as alcohol and smoking.

As in the Levi-Straussian tradition of anthropology, it may be that a new myth arises from a hodge-podge of different influences. But actually, it was the discussion of the Roman origins that helped us understand the central place of syncretism in explaining how Christmas can reinvent itself over time and yet retain links to these points of origin. It also shows how despite a variety of secular origins in popular culture Santa Claus can still retain the qualities of myth understood by anthropologists including the central role of systematic inversion and structure. So it may well be that knowing both of these points of history, the origins in Roman times and the new origins of Victorian times will help us in our quest to see how our contemporary Christmas may also reveal quite important structural and cosmological features. But these are perhaps better drawn out through embarking on an anthropological analysis that puts Christmas into the context of the three key issues I have suggested that it is resonant with: the family, the globe, and materialism.

Christmas and the family

All interpretations of Christmas acknowledge the central image of the family in its celebrations. Indeed, its very birth as a festival could be argued to be another “invention of tradition” since it has often been remarked that there is very little attention paid in the original Gospels to the events which are given such emphasis in Christmas celebrations (none at all in the earliest Gospel). Despite this we find the emergence of a festival that takes as its heart the relationship of parents to child, constantly reflected in the domestic focus found in the celebration of Christmas and in the importance of the family as an idiom for wider sociality.

This seems to represent the single most important contribution of Christianity itself to the further development of that festive tradition which preceded its creation. Although much of the literature, including the quotation from Libanius, dwells upon the importance of the domestic sphere and its incorporation of wider social groups, there is nothing in its Roman precedents which echoes the specific devotion to the nuclear family at the moment of the birth of a child. There is no particular suggestion that the relationships of the nuclear family are the focus of any of the three Roman festivals which preceded Christmas. Only in the new Christian festival is the trinity of mother and father devoted to the birth of their child the unambiguous centrepiece.

In many ways it would be much easier to appreciate this birth of Christmas if we were to refer to it as an Italian, rather than a Roman, festival. This is because the literature on the Roman family has tended to have a rather dry and legalistic bias in the tradition of classicists. By contrast, if we think of Christmas as Italian then it would immediately find resonance with many long-established stereotypes of Italian society centered on the family and especially children. A similar point emerges in a reading of Marina Warner (1976) on the evolution of the worship of the Virgin Mary, a cult which seems to have first emerged at the same period as Christmas. The cult of Mary also exhibits considerable continuity with pre-Christian religions, from which base it grows to incorporate the considerable emphasis upon the figure of the mother and virgin in Italian society, though Italy here could stand for this more general Mediterranean and then Catholic tradition. It comes as no surprise that it is Italy (more specifically St. Francis of Assisi) that is credited with the invention of the crib out of the various Christmas paraphernalia which survive until today. Warner indicates that this is part of a larger role taken by the Franciscans in developing the sense of the domestic family with the feminine image of humility and innocence (*ibid.*: 179–91).

This leaves us, however, with an uncomfortable break between the portrayal of the Roman and the Italian family. One solution would be to argue that there is a rapid and radical transformation between the two. The strongest argument for such a change and one which would fit precisely with the birth of Christmas comes from Goody's (1983) book on the development of the family and marriage in Europe. Goody argues that “key features of the kinship system have undergone a sudden change from the former ‘Mediterranean pattern’ to a new ‘European one’ or in Guichard's terms, from the oriental to the occidental” (1983: 39). Goody argues that the instrument of these changes was Christianity; not the original Christianity, but that which became the faith as a result of taking over the state and



the establishment (ibid.: 85). It is at this period of the mid to late fourth century, precisely the time when Christmas was invented, that we find the narrowing down to the modern ideology of the nuclear family, through the suppression of a much wider range of strategies for securing direct inheritance. Wider networks established through adoption, wet nursing, and concubinage, as well as the widening of forbidden degrees of marriage, all come into play at this time. Goody explains such changes in terms of the desire of the Church to secure those inheritances which resulted in a massive shift of land and goods to itself. The emphasis was placed upon the Church as natural inheritor in those families where the now narrower possibilities of direct inheritance to a son were not realized.

Goody's thesis has certainly been challenged, and the effect of the Church is clearly controversial. Nor does Goody address the necessity for an equally massive shift in sentiment and emotional attachment which could literally forge the Italian family out of the Roman. Some of these changes in relation to the child in particular may have been exaggerated (Garnsey 1991), but there remains an overall picture of a long-term shift at least in the ideology and probably in the balance of affectivity in the Italian family (Kertzer and Saller 1991: 15–17). The sources are stronger on shifts in legality than in sentiment, although one striking piece of evidence emerges from a systematic study of funerary inscriptions, which shows a marked increase in the emphasis upon children as compared to pre- and non-Christian families (Shaw 1991). More generally it may be the fact that Christianity's emergence as a dominant religion from popular practice, in contrast to state cults such as *Deus Sol Invictus*, led to a focus on the family of ordinary people's experience. By contrast, in the earlier period, the debates about imperial legislation suggest a much narrower concern for the impact of the state upon practices amongst elite families only.

So the evidence is for a long term shift in orientation to the family and especially to children, reflected in a festival which also shifts from state sponsorship to becoming a popular festival celebrated mainly by families in domestic settings. This idealisation of the family has remained ever since, and today Christmas plays a crucial role in the objectification of the family as the locus of a powerful sentimentality and devotion. Something very evident in the contemporary British Christmas where Christmas has become about the only time of the year where the extended family is recognised and celebrated.

This relationship to the family creates a particular tension echoed in the very title of Lofgren's contribution to the 1993 volume as *The great Christmas quarrel and other Swedish traditions*. On the one hand this is consummately a family celebration and on the other hand it thereby reminds everyone involved of the reasons why they in modern times we tend to keep our relationship to this wider family at a distance for the rest of the year. Löfgren notes the anxiety, tension, and quarrelling which arise from the problems of reconciling the normative ideals that have in a sense become the burden of anticipation that surrounds Christmas and the actual event itself. Indeed, this tension between ideal and actuality is at the heart of the modern family as noted by Gillis (1997). So the lovely old grandparent of the children's imagination may turn out to be the difficult and crusty old bear, or for that matter the unreliable alcoholic. Not to mention the possibility that the husband of the host family has inherited one set of traditions and his wife has her own family traditions and these may be contradictory to each other. To explore the relationship

between Christmas, the family and the wider values these objectify I will turn turn to my own ethnographic studies in Trinidad

Christmas and the family in Trinidad

Trinidad is a Caribbean island within sight of Venezuela. It is one of the two islands that make up the state of Trinidad and Tobago, but since this research is limited to Trinidad I refer just to Trinis. Trinidad is just under 5,000 sq. km., i.e., you can drive around it in a day. The indigenous population was largely wiped out by Spanish colonialists. After subsequent French and British rule, it became independent in 1962. The population of around 1.3 million is composed of around 40 percent descended from former African slaves, 40 percent descended from former South Asian indentured laborers, with the remainder having widespread origins including China, Madeira, and Lebanon.

In common with the earlier discussions of the Roman festivals, Trinidadian Christmas is best understood within a constellation of annual festivals including Carnival and New Year. There is now a well-established tradition in the analysis of values in the Caribbean which starts with Abrahams' importation of Geertz. Christmas is viewed by Abrahams as "a stylized rendering of some of the central expressive and moral concerns of the group" (1983: 98–99). More specifically Abrahams relates Christmas values to what Wilson (1973: 215–36) termed "respectability." These values assert family continuity, the centrality of the home, order, and tradition. A contrast is then made with Carnival, which is the time of "rudeness," that is of licentious and disordering activities.

This implies a kind of structural analysis of Caribbean society which incorporate two sets of normative values whose ideals are clarified by their opposition to each other and whose nature finds particular clarity in the form of festivals. This interpretation of Christmas and Carnival as the systematic inversion of the other is assisted by the observation of Old Year's Night, what in the UK is called New Year's Eve. This celebration is curious in that it starts with the most important church service of the year, far more important than Christmas itself. Yet this church service is immediately followed by the most important party of the year, with people discussing for weeks ahead which party they will go to. So Old Year's Night becomes the precise point of inversion (for a more detailed discussion see Miller 1994).

Indeed, while most outsiders associate Trinidad with its world famous Carnival, locally Christmas is viewed with a comparable degree of affection. Its importance is demonstrated in the sheer weight of labor that goes into it. Furthermore, while many Trinidadians talk of Carnival as the time "all a we is one," in practice many eschew it as immoral and it is often divisive. By contrast, it is Christmas that acts most clearly to unite virtually the entire gamut of this heterogeneous society, since most Hindus and Muslims celebrate Christmas with an intensity which is undifferentiated from that of Christians, though Hindus increasingly justify their participation by treating it as a continuity with the Hindu festival of Divali.

It is Divali which signals the beginning of the season of festivals in the Trinidadian calendar, while Old Year's Night, in turn, marks the beginning of preparations for Carnival, after which Lent followed by Easter closes off the festive season. These



festivals are not merely special occasions, which then intrude upon ordinary life. In Trinidad, Christmas and Carnival, together with their associated preparations, dominate a period of several months, and the saving up of resources for Christmas, in particular, may begin almost as soon as the last festive season has finished. Christmas and Carnival occupy a central place in the lives of many Trinidadians, such that the rest of the year could almost be viewed as the necessary rest, or breathing space, before the country gears itself up for the next festive season.

As a student of material culture, it was obvious from quite early on in my fieldwork that values such as the family were most clearly objectified through the home itself, and we need to start by observing this relationship; after all the very term domestic elides the house itself with that values of family. The period prior to Christmas is marked by three closely related activities: shopping, cooking, and cleaning the house. House interiors in Trinidad are almost invariably immaculate throughout the year. Despite this, in the fortnight before Christmas, when walking along the street, one invariably finds piles of furniture outside the house, for example, in the front porch, as the interior is swept, dusted, and “cobwebbed.” Not every household repaints every year, but if the householders are intending to repaint the house at all that year, then this is the period in which they will do it. Ideally the entire inside and outside is repainted, more usually the rooms with most wear and tear such as the kitchen and porch area. Householders stand proud and conspicuous with paintbrush in hand, if visitors arrive during the period. Paint retailers note minor increases in their sales marking the festivals of Eid, Divali, and the season for new houses, but thanks to Christmas, December sales amount to two to three times those of other months.

A similar situation exists with regard to furniture. For most of the year, the car upholsterers (which was incidentally the dominant industry in the town of Chaguanas where I conducted fieldwork) work only on vehicles, but in some cases they completely cease this work from the start of November in order to deal with domestic reupholstering. One upholsterer complained that households would only decide to make this expenditure at the last moment, and flood them with requests which they would insist should be completed by Christmas Eve.

The preparations for Christmas become a focal point of discussion as well as activity. A typical seasonal radio phone-in consisted of the interviewer telephoning housewives to discuss with them the measures they were taking for that year’s Christmas and any special tips about painting and cooking that might be passed on to the listeners. Each housewife would report upon which rooms were being repainted and which Christmas foods were being prepared for that year. In one of his numerous pieces on Christmas, dialect poet Paul Keens-Douglas (1975: 53–64), takes the perspective of an old-time domestic:

Lord Miss Julie, dis Christmas go’ kill me,
 Ah don’t know why dem people feel
 Dey must put up new curtain and cushion cover
 Every Lord living Christmas.
 Da woman cleaning house since November
 Like she married to Fadder Chrismus.

One element in the decoration of the house interior is items, such as holly, Santa Claus, artificial Christmas trees, and paper festoons in white, scarlet, and green

which belong to an international range of Christmas symbols. Christmas cards are displayed hung on string across the room. The calls in the newspapers for localization of images as in the headline “Pawpaw, Cashew and Melon rinds for Christmas fruit cake” are entirely ignored as stupidity. Such specific Christmas decorations are, however, in the main less important than the work done on the ordinary furnishings of the house, which will not be put away after Christmas, including the replacement of worn items or unpacking of new ones. The focus is upon the presentability of all aspects of the home itself, whether towels have worn thin, the flooring is adequate, some paint has been knocked away, and so forth.

The work is dominated by the female members of the household, but this is a time of year when men are also expected to take their domestic responsibilities seriously, and many men who at other times are free to escape domestic chores and slip away to drink with their friends are at this time of year strongly reminded of their domestic duties, particularly with regard to house painting and chair revarnishing. Men used to have a more formal role within Christmas as peer groups that went carousing, making music, and drinking their way from house to house on Christmas Eve, but in the new quiet, respectable Christmas this practice has declined, while women are more inclined to go visiting and not merely be hosts as in the past. Indeed, this causes problems for the older male ethos as made clear in a play by Keens-Douglas (1979: 45–54) called “Ah Pan for Christmas.” The play argues the non-viability of the alternative morality exemplified in the hard masculine steelbandsman. It begins with the lines: “Fargo was in ah bad mood. It was Christmas Eve, an’ he hated Christmas Eve. Because dat was de one time ah year he used to feel like nobody eh like he. Because Fargo didn’t have no family to like he.” The play continues with a mysterious figure-cum-spirit telling Fargo to find some family where he could visit, and ends with him being welcomed into the home of a distant aunt, in what becomes a Trinidadian version of *A Christmas carol*.

I was able to personally bear witness to the strength of this ideology. One year I was visiting households to see their Christmas preparations. A male friend immediately saw this as an opportunity to escape from the burden of his domestic chores, telling his wife he needed to show the anthropologist around. Actually, his idea was to take us instead to the home of his deputy (mistress). When we arrived there she was quite surprised assuming at such a time he would need to be with his wife. But she in turn took full advantage of the situation. Within ten minutes he was busily put to work cleaning the house and checking the decorations, only this time for his mistress instead of for his wife.

For several weeks then, all household members are feverishly engaged in experiencing the physicality of their home in a manner which changes their relationship to it, bringing back into focus the minutiae of furnishing which otherwise so readily become the taken-for-granted background to domestic life. The climax to these domestic preparations is Christmas Eve. It is then that the presentation of the house interior becomes most clearly ritualized. It is as though they forget all the time they have spent cleaning and decorating the house and feel the need to do the whole thing all over again. The ideal is that the family stay up late into the night on these tasks as well as Christmas baking. There were many stories of Christmases where couples had stayed up the whole night, often inviting neighbors in to “lime” with lively accompanying music. In some neighborhoods in particular, the beating



of bottles with spoons to the sound of the newly released calypsos accompanies the tidying and decorating. This is the time when any new items, such as towels or a new stereo system, should be unpacked and brought out for use.

The established closing ritual to these activities is the hanging out of the curtains. Of all the elements of home decoration, it is curtains which are most closely associated with Christmas, as confirmed by retailers. The oil-boom may have transformed a tradition of changing curtains to one of buying new ones where possible; the less affluent replace them with a set from storage or at least wash and rehang them. Given the number of households who managed to be in the middle of hanging curtains as I visited their homes on Christmas Eve, the activity is clearly extended in time for as long as possible. Once the new curtains are up, this is commonly felt to be both the climax and the end of the task of preparing one's home. Then people can finally go to bed.

The aesthetics of the living room may provide a clue as to the values being 'enshrined'. In summary, these include an emphasis on covering over and enclosing forms, deep upholstery and pile carpets, and a cramming in of ornaments and artificial flowers, together with many religious and secular homilies asserting domestic virtues and pictures of family activities such as weddings. The Christmas emphasis on the restoration of such decorations and furnishings as well as adding to their stock, provides, by Christmas Eve, the immaculate setting for what is ideally the key annual ritual of family reaffirmation as a moral and expressive order. The semantics follow the aesthetics, with much use of the dichotomy of outside and inside. For example, an "outside" woman is a synonym for a mistress/deputy as opposed to a legal or common-law wife.

After the house, the next element in Christmas preparations is a tremendous time spent on food and drink such as punch-a-crem (a potent mixture of over-proof rum, raw egg, and condensed milk), sorrel, ginger beer, black cake, and ham, as well as specially imported goods intimately associated with Christmas such as whiskey, apples, and grapes. Both the preparations of food or drink and the cleaning out of the house are intended to serve two demands. In the first instance, they provide the setting for the meal of Christmas Day, which is increasingly viewed as an intensely private celebration for the immediate family. This meal takes the best of the prepared edibles, including often three kinds of meat and the expensive imports and utilizes the home at its most pristine. The family is the clear focal point of Christmas Day activities, something reinforced by typical newspaper interviews with celebrities as to what they do on Christmas Day. This extended luncheon is intended as a quiet interlude between the feverish preparations and the commencement of intensive house visiting. In a country where loudspeakers in cars, houses, and shops provide a continual backdrop to daily life, Christmas morning is probably the only quiet time of the year. In the first instance this ritual is one of consolidation, culminating in the Christmas meal, which is seen as exclusive to the family proper, who receive the gift of the perfectly tidy and clean house and the choicest foods, enclosed by the new, or newly cleaned curtains. The family strives towards a sense of quiet solidity, often falling asleep after a heavy Christmas meal.

By Boxing Day (or late afternoon on Christmas Day), however, there is a marked change in orientation and it is as though the home and family, once secured, becomes the focal point of a process of progressive incorporation, through which

the domestic becomes not merely an enclosed space but a kind of centripetal force striving to bring as much of the outside world as possible into itself. Boxing Day begins a period when other people may be expected to drop in without invitation or formal arrangement. Such visiting is most intensive up to Old Year's Night, but in practice "Christmas" visiting continues for three weeks and more. Such visiting varies from the perfunctory, by neighbors who feel they are merely following an established obligation, to the use of Christmas for family and friends to re-establish connections which had been in danger of becoming lost. In all cases the visitor is expected to partake in the special foods which have been prepared and, at the very least, have a piece of cake and an accompanying drink. The food, and more particularly the drink, which accumulates through these successive visits help contribute to a general expansive, festive, and immensely hospitable conviviality for this season. This is in contrast to the rest of the year when at least for the new residential areas house-to-house visiting by neighbors is for many households quite exceptional. This is also the only occasion in the year when you might expect visiting by work colleagues. Christmas is also recognized at work itself by pre-Christmas parties, which expanded greatly during the oil boom. This probably followed global normative patterns established by multinational companies, though Christmas also vied with "crop-over" time for traditional festivities in the local sugar plantations. Similar parties may also be held, at schools, government institutions, residential areas, and churches.

As in many other countries, the religious side of Christmas is muted, with Old Year's Night becoming a more important church service than Christmas. There is, however, a general feeling that the values which are being expressed through Christmas celebration are congenial with the teachings of the Church, and the Church is much involved in the season of preparations. There are some associated activities such as blessing the crèche or singing carols. On my surveys, Hindus and Muslims may actually outspend Christians at Christmas.

To conclude, the discussion of family cannot be simply an analysis of kinship relations. Family actually stands for a core set of values that are central to Trinidadian cosmology. They stand for respectability, continuity, and a more general aesthetic of interiorization that keeps things stable safe and internal as opposed to the life of the street and the outside more generally. This then gives the structure to Christmas as the centripetal festival which draws so much of life back into rites of devotion directed to the inside space of the family. All of this comes together in the concept of the domestic, and the ideal of Christmas as THE domestic festival.

Christmas as the festival of the local and the global

This section focuses on a curious paradox of the contemporary Christmas. It is not just that Christmas is a global and a local festival. It is that Christmas is now by far the most local and the most global festival. It seems clear then that its ability to be both of these things simultaneously implies that the festival has taken on some kind of role in becoming a direct point of linkage between these two. With regard to the global as noted in the introduction it is as though, in some countries, Christmas has swallowed up all other seasonal festivals, to become the single seasonal festival



that stands for all others. It has also spread to parts of the world which were not and are not Christian, and may not have had a traditional winter celebration – partly because in some of these regions Christmas comes in the middle of summer. With regard to the local the evidence is simply the degree to which people insist that their very specific region of origin has its own special way of celebrating Christmas and that this feels like the most authentic form of Christmas. It simply isn't a proper Christmas unless you celebrate the festival at your own home, since no one else knows how to do it properly. Christmas has become a reservoir of very specific local and folk custom. Again in many countries it may be the only time of the year when such parochial and local customs are retained. Curiously this emphasis on distinct forms of celebration seems to be the case even for those areas where the adoption of Christmas is relatively recent. This is the evidence that Christmas has simultaneously become the most local and the most global festival.

Christmas is not entirely global, there are some countries such as Israel that systematically eschew the celebration of Christmas in order to reinforce their sense of distinct identity. But many other non-Christian countries have seen Christmas as now sufficiently separated out from its religious moorings to be acceptable as a global festival. In such cases, there may be no particular affinity with the family, as rooted in the European tradition of Christmas. Instead the festival may be appropriated for whatever setting seems to work for the country in question. The book *Unwrapping Christmas* has several examples of these. One chapter by Bodenhorn (1993) concerns the practices of the Iñupiat indigenous people of Alaska. As it happens in this case there is a particular resistance to equating the festival with the family since this is a society with traditionally much larger social groupings and there is a constant fear that the influence of global forces will lead to the “break-down” of society into mere family. So instead Christmas is used to assert an ideology of traditional communal form.

If Bodenhorn demonstrates a cautious acceptance that is concerned that the festival does not endanger tradition values then Moeran and Skov (1993) point out the possibilities of creative appropriation which matches the festival to dynamic new forces in the case of Japan. Here the festival is also a social celebration, but given the prior existence of other festivals directed to the family and home, Christmas has been appropriated for the idealization of a new social formation—the “dating” of young couples. Christmas has been deployed with the enthusiastic support of commerce to create a festival dedicated to this new social activity, which previously had no comparable marking in Japanese ritual.

The point then is not that Christmas necessarily arrives with its baggage of particular symbolism. It may not be related either to Christianity or the family. Instead it serves to mark a bridge between participation in something clearly recognized as global, with some specific aspect of that regional tradition that retains some sense of the particular and the distinct. As in these cases the most significant process involved in establishing Christmas seems to be its syncretic quality. But actually there is nothing particularly new about this. If one looks back at the historical records it is clear that Christmas was always highly syncretic with local folk traditions. Indeed, Christmas is a festival beloved of folklorists. It is they who have provided by far the richest literature on the festival. It seems that at whatever date and region we encounter the festival it has accreted to itself a wealth of local rites and

customs often of considerable specificity. If a given region of Europe has no other memorable and “quaint” traditions it would seem at least to have some Christmas “mumming” house visiting or special foods in association. Admittedly this may not be for the December 25 festival, since Christmas seems to be dispersed amongst a wide range of feasts and saints’ days from November to New Year’s Day, but there is a recognizable commonality to these winter festivities. Today if there remains some possibility of the larger community of a village or suburb having a sense of itself as such then this is the festival in which the original villagers combine with the newly settled commuters and recently retired to show their devotion to the local community as pseudo-family. Here they will sing Christmas carols, but be delighted also to sing a version or tune that is remembered as specific to this region.

A typical example of this sense of Christmas as managing to forge links at practically every level from the most global to the most local is evident in the German tradition. Initially the concern was not so much global as encompassing the newly emergent larger entity of Germany itself. Christmas was particularly successful as part of an emergent nationalism. It was a series of largely Protestant and Prussian customs that came to be accepted as core to the new German Christmas, but at the same time the emphasis upon the family of Jesus including Mary helped make the festival congenial also to traditions within German Catholic Christianity Perry (2010: 13–64). The sense that *Gemütlichkeit* could be both quintessentially German and at the heart of Christmas allowed this to work both as a domestic festival withdrawn from its previous more public expression and yet equally to be a powerful idiom for the celebration of the German folk tradition. Germany had its own key stories such as Hoffman’s 1816 *Nussknacker und Mausekönig*. But there is also trade with Britain. Dickens *A Christmas Carol* was immediately translated into German in 1843, While Victoria’s German consort Prince Albert brought the German tradition of the Christmas tree to the British court in 1840 (*ibid.*: 30) and the tree goes on to become the best established German contribution to global Christmas.

As a national project, Christmas could hardly have been more successful. Germans soon came to believe as a matter of faith that while many other countries celebrated Christmas, the German Christmas was undoubtedly the best and fullest manifestation of the potential of this festival. As Perry sees it, the festival played a major role in creating a bulwark of morality and a sense of the self in tension with the dangers of modernity. The national project is however entirely consistent with the preservation of localized traditions. At the same time that Christmas comes to play its role in the unity of Germany, it also shows how that can be made compatible with a continued wealth of highly localized traditions. So everywhere in Germany one expects to find a Christmas tree, Christmas markets, and the increasingly the global form of Santa Claus. But in addition, there may be particular customs related to Martinmas, St. Nicholas and Ruprecht, or local varieties of spiced cake, biscuit molds, and Christmas punch (Ruland 1978). So even within the single nation we see how syncretism facilitates this global to local connection. Similarly, the festivals connect well with a spirit of *Heimat* especially for the wider German diaspora celebrating Christmas in far-flung regions such as the United States.

These same properties work not only spatially between the village and the nation but also to allow Christmas to shift quite rapidly in relation to changing political regimes. One of the most extreme examples is evident from the way the Nazi



regime appropriated Christmas for its own ends (Perry 2005). Emphasizing the wider set of folk and pagan origins now reconfigured as a celebration of German blood and soil, it also re-emphasized the linkages with the public sphere and the state as opposed to the private celebration. Indeed, in some respects the attempt to create a more formal state celebration, which included an element of Emperor/Führer worship, was reminiscent of the state's involvement in the original festival of *Dies Natalis Solis Invicti*, which also foregrounded non-Roman (i.e., analogous to non-Christian Pagan) elements. But equally in the post-war period Perry (2002) argues that the Madonna of Stalingrad and the suffering of the ordinary soldier were used as part of a re-Christianization of Christmas that had allowed Christmas to perform the quite difficult task in the post-war period of becoming re-established as a thoroughly German festival with heart-warming local aspects, while successfully repudiating this Nazi interlude.

The irony is that on the one hand the folklorists constantly celebrate Christmas as a place where local character and authenticity is retained. On the other hand, they tend to be the most vociferous in their revulsion against recent commercial influences such as pop songs and films which they deem to be the main threat to these older folk varieties of Christmas. This is ironic because it has to be exactly the same syncretic aspect to Christmas that previously allowed it to find a point of reconciliation with these myriad local folk traditions that today allows it to incorporate a comparable range of commercial and popular interventions, from Santa Claus in his department store grottoes, to the speeches of Queens and Presidents, to office parties (see papers in Whiteley 2008). In both cases we find an uneasy but marked relationship between the legitimacy of formal religion and a multitude of popular practices, which usually have a tenuous religious justification at best.

It is here in particular where the Roman origins seem the best source for explaining contemporary transformations in Christmas. If Christmas continues to thrive mainly through its extraordinary syncretic nature, it may be no coincidence that Halsberghe notes, "The phenomenon of religious syncretism had certainly been in evidence for a long time before it attained its dominant position in the religious life of the third and fourth centuries. The cult of *Deus Sol Invictus*, influenced as it was by neo-Platonism, is one of the clearest examples of this phenomenon known to us" (ibid.: x). After all the later Roman Empire had its own tension between the global ideal it saw itself representing the various local forces it needed to incorporate including this batch of Eastern cults such as Sol, Mithra, and Christianity. For the Romans of the fourth century, as for us in the twentieth, this meant simultaneity a feeling that the world becoming one place, but that one place fragmenting into heterogeneity.

Syncretism remains remarkably agile in Christmas. It even manages to survive the formal dismissal of the festival itself. For example Lane (1981: 137–38) notes that in the Soviet Union Christmas was abolished, but Lenin created the "New Year's Celebration," which included lighting up a tree, giving presents to children, sending out cards, and the figure of Grandfather Frost. By contrast, as the festival starts to penetrate into areas such as South Asia, China, and the Muslim world it seems that, potentially at least, we have the makings of the first truly global festival as popular culture (though we are admittedly a long way from such a state at present).

My point is that in many respects the case-study of Christmas provides the vanguard for the now fashionable studies which come under the term “local” and “global.” It demonstrates more securely than any theoretical argument the weaknesses of approaches which posit global homogenization against local heterogeneity. Because in this case we see clearly that the ability of this festival to become potentially the very epitome of globalization derives from the very same quality of easy syncretism which earlier on made Christmas in each and every place the triumph of localism, the protector and legitimation for specific regional and particular customs and traditions. As Löfgren (1993) notes for Sweden this is the festival par excellence where the arguments emerge from the strong sense that “we” have always celebrated Christmas in this way, only to discover that the particular rite in question turns out to be the family tradition of watching Walt Disney cartoons.

How Christmas creates Trinidad

As previously noted, any attempt to understand the significance of Christmas in Trinidad starts from its systematic opposition to Carnival. One area of such distinction is that of time itself. In the case of Carnival, although there is a standard structure, everyone is waiting to see how this year’s Carnival will be special, will be an event, based around the new styles, costumes, music, and so forth which surround it. Even if you dress in the same costume each year you must make it fresh for each Carnival. By contrast one of the most commonly expressed observations about Christmas is that ideally it should be as it has always been. Christmas becomes the focal point for a sentimental and nostalgic view of the past centered upon the celebration of Christmas itself.

If one reads the newspapers, it is clear that there is now an established genre of Christmas nostalgia. Typically, a journalist from a rural or low-income background will tell how his family prepared Christmas when he or she was a child, emphasizing all the work which was done by hand and the “warm” atmosphere. For example, Angela Pidduck recalls (*Trinidad Express*, 19 Dec. 1990) how “My grandmother pulled out the old hand sewing-machine, she cut the curtains and Morris chair cushion covers, we the children (boys and girls) took turns turning the handle . . . But there was warmth, sharing and love, not only amongst ourselves at 94 Picton Street, but in the neighbourhood. We shared pastelles and ponche de creme after midnight mass at home . . .” In most such articles the family represents longevity and descent, the grandparents juxtaposed with the children, a sense of continuity with tradition being handed down through the generations. In talking about the past, a shopkeeper’s daughter claims that the traditional start of the Christmas season was marked by her father, who would boil up a ham in a pitch oil (kerosene) tin. Everybody in the area, even those on a very low income, would feel it essential to buy at least a token amount of ham, such as an ounce. The involvement of these items is taken as making for a specifically “Trinidadian” Christmas.

This use of time as a dimension for expressing the specificity of local Christmas then complements the use of space which was referred to the previous discussion of Trinidadian Christmas as the centripetal aesthetic. This both draws people to the domestic and compresses historical time into the timeless. It also tackles what



is generally regarded as the most divisive of all social dimensions in Trinidad, that is ethnicity. Trinidadian Christmas has an ethnicity all to itself, based upon the concept of “Spanish.” A number of the special foods which are only made around the Christmas season, including *pastelle* and *arepas* are associated specifically with the Spanish traditions of Trinidad. As such, they are related to another key symbol of Christmas, which is the Parang music. This consists of small groups of musicians with instruments such as the cuatro and the one-stringed box bass, who together with singers perform traditional Christmas songs in Spanish. Traditionally these were men (and some women) travelling from house to house on Christmas evening, and the term Parang is said to derive from the Spanish *parranda*, a term for carousal groups (Taylor 1977). In 1988, Parang had become more closely associated with the competitive playing of more established groups, culminating in a grand competition. The singers often cannot understand the content of their songs, and Parang is not played at any other time of the year, but for this period it briefly dominates the radio, and is evocative, especially of some past period when it is assumed it was itself more common.

If one asks formally who are the Spanish in Trinidad, then there are a number of possible answers (Winer and Aguilar 1991), depending upon whether one lays stress upon the original colonists who ruled the country, prior to transference of sovereignty to the British, but who were never a significant demographic presence, or the Venezuelan elite mentioned by Braithwaite (1975: 74–75), or most importantly the migrating peons, also from Venezuela, who formed quite homogeneous villages of the kind depicted by V. S. Naipaul in his novel *The suffrage of Elvira* (1958). All of these definitions, however, would fail to evoke the actual meaning of the term “Spanish” as used colloquially in contemporary Trinidad. First, the term “Spanish” in its reference to the original colonists also incorporates the Carib and Arawak indigenous pre-colonial populations. But in practice these groups decimated by disease became incorporated into the actual Spanish colony and it is doubtful if any pure descent from these groups remains. Still it is the term “Spanish” which is employed simply to signify an element of Amerindian blood as part of a generic sense of roots that go beyond slavery and indentured labor. Similarly, the term “Spanish” has become, in rural areas, synonymous with the concept “mixed.” Thus, a person whose actual ancestry includes a mixture of East Indian, Chinese, French, and African might have been transmuted through the category “mixed” into a sense of being “kind of” Spanish. The importance of the term lies precisely in its vague aura of an alternative ancestry which is specifically not pure African, East Indian, or White. Within Spanish, then, a sense of being mixed is suffused with the connotation of being of the original or ancient inhabitation.

It is at Christmas time, that many Trinidadians manage to locate amongst their ancestry at least an element of Spanish. This provides them with a sense that they have a kind of natural affiliation with the associated music and food, but also has deeper consequences. To have an ethnicity that evokes a sense of Trinidad beyond the images of rupture such as slavery and indentured labor is to evoke a generic objectification of the land itself. This is also suggested by a figure in the rituals performed by Hindu Trinidadians. The propitiation of a spirit termed the *Dih* seems to have arisen as a link between the present occupants of a house or land and its original owner (see Kiass 1961: 176–78; Vertovec 1992: 113, 215). The

image of the Dih is also found especially at lower “caste” Madrassi style temples, e.g., at Kalimai temples, though the worship has a much wider following in the home. A curious feature of Dih worship is that the figure represented appears to have Spanish looks and is seen as representing the ancestral lands of Trinidad. When one worships the Dih one worships the property upon which one’s house is based. The form of worship is itself syncretic, as these East-Indian and Spanish elements are complemented by typical ex-African aspects such as the use of rum and cigarettes. The main distinction made is whether one sacrifices a fowl to the Dih. For many Hindus who otherwise have nothing to do with animal sacrifice this is the one point at which such sacrifice is carried out. The Dih then represents the integration of Trinidadian land, as existing prior to the indentureship. Many in the East Indian population who would never claim ancestral links to the African population seem very comfortable with the idea that they are in part of Spanish descent.

All this points to an essentially invented concept of Spanish ethnicity, which does not depend on ancestral links to anyone that was actually Spanish but instead evokes a generalized sense of the traditions of the land. The significance of Spanish ethnicity is that it enables Trinidadians, who are usually characterized (not least by themselves) as comparatively “rootless,” to conceive of their current practices as having a derivation from a general line of descent, which pretty much everyone in the country is able to associate themselves with. It manages to create a national identity for Trinidadians that otherwise would be subject to endless dispute. In this way, Christmas manages to invent Trinidad just as it helped to create Englishness and German. It is noticeable that this evolution of “Spanish” has received neither official sanction nor encouragement, but appears to represent the spontaneous dynamics of popular culture.

Christmas in Trinidad as represented here lies uneasily against current trends in anthropological theory. Anthropologists are busy discovering that what had been described as bounded societies and cultures are actually creolized and pluralist. It is not just in Germany that academics have become uneasy about the implications of a concept of culture that suggests exclusivity and absolute distinction from others while implying homogeneity within to contrast with the heterogeneity without. The problem has also been within anthropology itself which for a long time colluded in this creation of the culture concept.

But while countries such as Germany and disciplines such as anthropology may have reasons for distancing themselves from the culture concept, in Trinidad we see this trend in reverse. This is a highly creolized and comparatively rootless region, first because its population was imported from practically every other part of the world. Then no sooner had this coalesced as a country when we see new forces of dispersion with transnational labor and outward migration. Trinidad should therefore provide evidence to support this critique of the culture concept as an academic or nationalistic forgery. The problem is that anthropologists in their self-critique of previous fashions and methodologies must also allow for the possibility that a given group of people may well be engaged in the opposite endeavor especially when, as here, they have emerged from a history replete with fragmentation and denigration. The evidence suggests that for at least a chunk of the year tremendous effort is invested in creating a self-image of bounded society, nostalgic common



culture, and sentimental roots. Christmas with its Spanish ethnicity gives Trinidad this gift of Culture.

So Christmas in Trinidad today is intensely nationalistic. Many of the soca/Parang songs at this season have lines such as “Trini Christmas is the best,” the calypso singer Scrunter is perhaps the most successful exponent of this Christmas version of Trinidadian popular music. Trinidadians are just as convinced as Germans that the only proper way to celebrate Christmas is the way they experienced as children. So in its own way Trinidad expresses this larger relationship between the global and the local and the success of syncretic creation. The scenes of school kids sweating in front of plastic sprayed on snow, demonstrate the work involved in incorporating such a European festival within this global ecumene, but at the same time there is just as much sentiment that the only proper way to celebrate Christmas is the Trini way and everyone should therefore come home at Christmas from whatever country they now reside in otherwise they will be condemned to an inappropriate and inauthentic foreign Christmas.

Christmas and materialism

This book started with a curious piece of evidence from the Roman period. A quotation from a crusty conservative, who normally condemned the materialism of his time, but seemed to be celebrating a virtual explosion of extravagant expenditure around the fourth century festival of the Kalends where a thousand presents pour out like flowers in spring. This should put us on our guard against what is probably the most common colloquial account of the dynamics of contemporary Christmas. According to this Christmas was once indeed the pure festival of close family togetherness, but its heart has been lost in the relentless exploitation of its possibilities by a combination of individual materialism and capitalist profit-taking. Often this is associated with the Americanization of Christmas, noting for example the influence of Coca-Cola on the iconography of Santa Claus or how Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer was devised as a highly successful marketing gimmick by an advertising executive in 1939 (Barnett, 1954: 108–14). Belk (1993) provides many examples and arguments that suggest ways in which Christmas now embodies and expresses core ideological tropes of contemporary capitalism and business. As he notes the festival is generally regarded today as a national celebration of spending and its development was closely associated with the rise of department stores and their campaigns to create and sell Christmas merchandise of many kinds. There is a particularly strong link in the United States with the success of Coca-Cola (McKay 2008). As such Christmas seems at best an excuse at worst a sacralization for the worst excesses of modern consumerism.

There is evident continuity between this argument and the previous discussion, since many authors recognize that it is the very creativity of modern consumerism that has provided the driving force behind contemporary forms of Christmas syncretism. The most evident example is Japan, where Moeran and Skov (1993) document a national dialogue articulated through advertising and the media which is pitched at the level of deciding what Christmas goods should be about and how they should be marketed. As such, capitalist commodity culture becomes a kind

of language through which a national discussion takes place as to the future form of culture (compare Wilk 1990). As Moeran and Skov note, when this reaches the extreme integration between commerce and Christmas found in Japan consumerism and culture become essentially synonymous. In this case materialism is not a “problem” which Christmas may be “for” or “against.” On the contrary, commerce together with consumers utilize what the authors call “kitsch” to constitute the materiality of the new festival.

Again, this may have precedents. What is now accepted as highly traditional within the German Christmas may also have originally developed through collusion with commerce. This has been suggested recently by Hamlin (2003) in this work on the development of the modern German toy industry. While the Japanese use Christmas to integrate dating, in Germany the festival is used to resolve a tension within the *bürgerliche* ideals of domesticity during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Having lost its traditional links to the state and to productive economy the German family was reconstituted around a more domestic ideal. But this was based on a highly authoritarian ideal of parenting reflected in many stories of cold and distant fathers.

Previously Christmas was also more orientated to the public sphere and communal values with gifts to the local indigents. But now “The old traditions of Christmas were everywhere reworked to transform the holiday from a public festival of social inversion to a family affair emphasizing children and an idealized vision of intimate domesticity. Christmas was an opportunity to actualize the *bürgerliche* ideology, to live in the ideal” (ibid.: 861). While books were established as proper gifts compatible with the project of *bildung*, now toys were added that recognized children as having their own demands and as symbols of pure pleasure. There was also an advantage to the The Weihnachtsmann, in displacing the father as the giver of gifts in that this did not detract from the latter’s authoritarian position and also obscured the relationship between gifts and commodities. So the commercialization of Christmas was an instrument in resolving tensions within the family ideal, which could not be both the source of care as authority and love as that which gives pleasure. Yet Hamlin notes that once this was established by the end of the nineteenth century it also provided the basis for the modern critique of Christmas. So already the German popular press such as *The Berliner Tageblatt* and the family magazine *Daheim* were complaining that the festival was being ruined by commercialization

So a close association between Christmas and commerce does not necessarily mean that one is simply the expression of the other. An alternative reading of this relationship is found in Carrier (1993). While Belk focuses on the relationship at the level of commerce and marketing, Carrier looks instead to the role of consumption, and more specifically to anthropological theories of the gift. If there exists one core foundational text to the very discipline of anthropology it is perhaps that of Marcel Mauss (1954) called simply *The gift*. Most importantly this work established a core contrast between the commodity which was seen as decontextualized from human relationships, an exchange between seller and buyer without any knowledge or acquaintance between the two. By contrast it is the gift that establishes the very basis of social relationships in tribal societies, as the sequential debt between to partners in an ongoing gift exchange is the continuity of their relationship to each other.



After all the association between Christmas and shopping highlighted by Belk can be attributed in large measure to the need to purchase gifts. There is quite an established literature Christmas gift giving (e.g., Caplow 1984, Cheal 1988) although the material is reinterpreted in very different ways. Carrier builds on this earlier work to regard gift giving as the core to Christmas. His argument closely follows that of my own in *Material culture and mass consumption* (Miller 1987) and also *A theory of shopping* (Miller 1998). In these books, I argue that few people positively associate with the worlds of capitalism and commerce as such. They may regard them as entirely necessary for their wellbeing, but alongside the state with its bureaucracy and science with its experiments, these are quite vast, depersonalized and alienating forces. However, the act of purchase separate out the object from being merely an emblem of the vast world of commerce and makes it instead a very specific and particular object that we possess. It is more specific because of the range that we rejected in selecting it. We saw over three hundred dresses that were not “me” until we bought the one that was. This allows the dress to be immediately regarded as inalienable in contrast to the alienation of commerce. We may even refuse to lend it to our sister such is the degree of instant personalization.

Similarly for Carrier, following Mauss, the gift is the process which negates the previous existence of the thing as commodity. Right before Christmas we are stuck in a crowded store with hundreds of sweaty other people because we have only two days left to buy a Christmas present for our parents or Aunt and we have difficulty deciding what exactly we should buy them. In effect this is the hard labor required for us to extract the thing as merely something in a shop and make it the exact right object that shows we have regard for the particular taste and character of the person we are buying the present for. As a gift it represents the long term nature of our relationships, often those of kinship, which is why this is entirely an obligatory rather than voluntary process. We cannot fail to give our children or parents the presents expected of us.

To take this further we can return to another point made in the history of Christmas. In this case, not the origins in Roman times, but the idea that Christmas was re-invented by the Victorians, and that the most effective instruments in this task was the writing of *A Christmas carol* by Charles Dickens. Even I as a child in the 1960s and 70s recall that practically every year we would watch a cartoon version or read a comic book version of this story. In brief the story starts with the powerful image of Scrooge as a man who knows all about how to make money but nothing about how to spend it. As a result, for Scrooge money exists only in its abstract and quantified manner as something that remains in its universalistic form as coinage a kind of fetishism of money to which as Simmel (*Philosophy of money*) pointed out it is always potentially subject.

In Dicken’s story the miser and skinflint Scrooge is visited by the ghosts of Christmas past, present, and future, which embody that spirit of Christmas itself as something Scrooge has lost. Scrooge is made to realize that while he has wealth in gold this will only lead to his increasing loneliness and isolation from society. By contrast his clerk Cratchit who stands for contemporary poverty and lack of money is shown to use what little he has in order to buy the provisions for at least a basic Christmas, where the lack of wealth is replaced by the abundance of warmth found in this family gathering. So the right kind of expenditure is thereby

associated with kindness, consideration, compassion, and above all the happy family in their domestic context. Scrooge must learn that Christmas is actually a kind of alchemy in reverse, in which the spirit of Christmas is used to transmute pure gold back into the base and ordinary ingredients of human warmth and sociality.

Critical to this is the timing. The re-invention or at least re-invigoration of Christmas by Dickens takes place at the heart of the Victorian period. Dickens and his readers created a Christmas whose prime concern was precisely the central problem of the new materialism—how in a world of increasing commodification the aim must be to enjoy the benefits of an escape from poverty but not be lost in the reification and asocial abstractions of goods as commodities and wealth as merely money. The “spirit” of Christmas provided the answer not just for this Victorian period but for an increasingly affluent society thereafter. The contradiction of materialism was particularly evident for the specific group that Dickens wrote for. This was a middle class whose new importance at that time was the first sign of what has since emerged as the most powerful class fraction in global terms. Christmas provided the means by which this class could enjoy the benefits of their new wealth while believing that they could still turn their base coin back into the golden-hearted spirit of Christmas sociality.

A central image in Dickens’ portraits of Christmas is the domestic sphere—the coldness of Scrooge’s home versus the warmth of Cratchit’s. We can now see why Libanius, echoing earlier Roman moralists, can be harshly condemnatory of the lack of proper values which lavishness at other times is seen as reflecting. Yet he does not appear to condemn, but actually to celebrate, the extravagance, feasting, and present-giving represented by the pre-Christmas festival of the Kalends. The festival makes this a ritual celebration of proper values and in a sense then a taming of the dangers of lavishness and materialism, here transformed from an immoral to a moral act. Levi-Strauss (1993) makes the analogy with the feasting of the dead. It is materialism itself which, as Simmel and others have argued, is always understood as potentially the death as well as the medium of social life.

Christmas and materialism in Trinidad

Turning to Trinidad we find the global critique of Christmas as an authentic religious festival now destroyed by contemporary materialism to be fully manifested in the local media. The newspapers of the season are full of articles which bemoan the inability of Christmas to be like the “old days.” They look back to the days of caroling, noting that any carolers today would probably be torn apart by guard dogs. There is a general agreement amongst written accounts that Trinidadian Christmas has lost its authentic roots through commercialization. Indeed, some of the media coverage of the 1988 Christmas was celebratory of the fact that recession was bringing to an end the Christmas that had developed in the boom time. The Trinidad *Mirror* of December 13 of that year begins, “Do you remember the time when you couldn’t get that Christmas feeling unless your home was well stocked with Europe’s best whisky, cognac, brandy and wines, not forgetting the apples and grapes that lent some colour to the joyous occasion?” The Christmas Day



supplement for the Trinidad *Sunday Guardian* included an article called “Return to the real old time Christmas’ contrasting the boom time when “It was a straight case of who could outdo who . . . who could have the bigger staff party; who could buy the more expensive gifts.” This is compared to the new post-boom Christmas, which is described in a litany of house preparation activities such as “the stripping of the entire house . . . scrubbing floors: hanging new curtains and putting on either new, washed or dyed cushion covers.”

In addition to this nostalgia for a pre-materialistic Christmas there is, in Trinidad, an additional and equally powerful critique of Christmas as an unwarranted import which smothers the desire for promoting local culture and is thereby a symbol of inauthenticity. This reliance on imports dominated the press in the 1990–1991 season. *The Trinidad and Tobago Review* article for November 1990 (23) “Decking the Town with Bouts of Folly” pilloried children who, while sweating from the sun, peer in at snowmen and holly. It bemoaned the welcome given to the re-importation of apples and grapes banned for three years to save foreign exchange. Accusing the population of failing to make the transition to a “culturally independent Christmas” it goes still further to argue, “The foreign exchange leakage by way of importing a snow-scape constitutes only the outward and visible expenses. The price-tag for loss of cultural independence is infinitely more expensive.” Similarly, an article entitled “Deck the Malls” (*Trinidad Sunday Guardian Magazine*, 16 December 1990) notes, “What a paradox! To find a bit of Yuletide festivity one must visit bastions of capitalism—the mecca of modern day shopping—the malls . . . They have now become little centres of Yuletide charm hat with its myriad decorations, festive piped music, weekend activities such as choral singing and parang, and of course, we still buy, buy, buy.”

They are not exaggerating. Many retailers noted that December sales for certain products such as curtains, exceed other months by up to a factor of eight and make jokes about how they could be closed for the rest of the year with little loss of profits. Trinidad, like many other countries today, approaches Christmas by an extraordinarily intensive bout of shopping. In the malls and main streets of Chaguanas (the town where I lived) stalls are set up in front of shops and more stalls in front of those stalls, making the town virtually impassable to traffic.

The same newspapers that condemn the commercialization of Christmas also contribute to the crescendo of buying. Not only through adverts. One group that is allowed to be explicitly materialistic is the children who feature in the special “letters to Santa” sections of the daily papers which include literally hundreds of requests mostly to the point, as in:

Dear Santa Claus, I would like you to bring me a motorbike complete with hat and shades this Christmas. Thanking you in advance. TG Chaguanas

Though some elaboration can occur as in:

Dear Santa, I hope you are holding up fine with your reindeer. I am ten years old, I would like a computer game called pac-man (small) and a game called Clue. Would you send a special gift to my father, grandma, grandpa and aunty? I have been very good during the year. Please Santa, I deserve those gifts. My parents are not working. Merry Christmas and have the brightest new year ever. SK

Although Trinidadians are aware of the stress on gift-giving as the key form of Christmas expenditure in other countries, both wholesalers and retailers in gift items confirmed that the giving of gifts other than to young children is a small element of expenditure as compared to spending on new items for one's own home. For the gift shops, it is glassware, artificial flowers, and items used for furnishing and interior decoration which are the main focus of December sales. It is the house rather than the person which is the main recipient of Christmas shopping. The major expenditures, often planned for a considerable period, and aided by hire purchase schemes, are on items such as upholstered couch sets or dining suites. Ideally, the housewife puts money aside week after week during the rest of the year, in order to save for the special expenditures of Christmas, or alternatively uses the *sou sou* (a rotating credit scheme) for the purpose of Christmas saving.

When asked during surveys of household interiors about when an item was purchased, people would note that the dining suite and electric fan were bought for this Christmas while the couch set and stereo were brought for the previous Christmas, and so it would go on until there was virtually no major item which was not bought for Christmas. Hire purchase spreads the payment over the year but the item is delivered in time for Christmas. People also use sales at other times of the year, or exploit what has become a national institution—travelling on charter flights to Caracas and Margarita for intensive shopping in Venezuela, where prices are substantially cheaper. But they then store the main purchases unused in a cupboard until Christmas, bringing them out for the first time at Christmas Eve. This suggests that as far as possible Trinidadians desire to associate their purchasing of goods with Christmas; it seems as though if they could only shop this one time of the year for major items they would much prefer it.

Some of these items may be specific Christmas expenditure since special glasses, tablecloths, and other furnishings, often in red green and white were a traditional feature. But the bulk of expenditure is directed to the refurbishment of the home. What this implies is that while the timing of the purchase is dictated by Christmas, the need for these items is not. Curtains do need to be changed, cushion covers must be renewed; similarly with items such as bedsheets, towels, upholstery, and utensils. They were all items that would be required at some stage in the year. Even the Christmas whiskey was seen by many as representing their yearly investment in this element of their hospitality costs, though recognizing that with enough visitors it might only last the season. In other words, the major effect of Christmas on expenditure directed to the house may not be an overall increase in expenditure, in as much as these things would have been bought at some time or other. Rather, what we are witnessing is more a seasonal concentration in expenditures.

But why this desire to relate shopping to Christmas? At one time it was common for children in Trinidad to bring the new toys they had received for Christmas to the church for a special blessing. Indeed, this practice sometimes extended to the purchase of cars and other items. Although such formal blessing has declined, the impulse behind it may explain how this commercialization of Christmas is managed. The religious element of Christmas Eve, culminating in Midnight Mass, has been gradually replaced by the secular ritual of bringing out the new goods and placing them in the home. It is the home itself which now objectifies the centrality



of Christian teaching. Over more than a century a systematic network of values has emerged in which the very sense of being religious is directly associated with the purchase of a home and the sanctity of a church wedding. This is a powerful association throughout the Caribbean, where people prefer to have children outside of wedlock because it is only when you can afford your own home that it feels right to be legally married, which is also when we see couples dramatically increasing in religiosity. This is still the case for contemporary Trinidad.

The closing ritual of Christmas Eve, the hanging of the curtains or drapes which signify the boundary between the inside world of domesticity and religion as against the outside world with its implications of transience and sin, is therefore a manifestly clear construction of the home as temple to the project of lineal family identity and descent, a theme echoed in the details of interior decoration, whether marriage photos or symbols of education such as encyclopedias. The festival thereby transforms what would be a mundane impersonal process of shopping and installing goods, which might have had little other than utilitarian significance, into an activity that fills each purchase with a set of positive, if complex, associations constructed through the festival of Christmas itself.

So in Trinidad just as with Dickens and the UK we see that the relationship between materialism and Christmas may be quite the opposite of that usually supposed. In Trinidad materialism is not the problem of having goods. Trinidadians know too much about recent poverty to have many qualms about the accumulation of wealth. But many conversations do express a more general concern about the antisocial orientation of some “people today,” which concurs with that common theme in all the ancestors of the social sciences about the reification of goods or money leading to a general loss of sociality. Trinidadians don’t need to read the Frankfurt School to have a sense of the modern tendency for the qualitative and the social to be replaced by the quantitative and abstract. This unease has come to the fore with the effects of the oil-boom of the late 1970s and early 1980s, when for the first time the issue of materialism became a very real one for many Trinidadians. It is no coincidence that the Christmas themes described here crystallize around this time of the oil boom.

Christmas thereby becomes an example of one of the many strategies which are found in modern consumption, through which popular practice attempts to reincorporate into the construction of social bonds activities which threaten to become antisocial (Miller 1987: 178–217). In effect Christmas becomes the first festival of anti-materialism. At this point there is an obvious affinity with Carrier’s (1993) reference back to Mauss and transformation of commodities into gifts.

This strategy is conducted first at the level of the family and finally at the level of the island itself. Tropical snowscapes are utterly authentic, because it is the same process which transforms a history of alienation into the sense of inalienable nationalism through imagined Spanish roots. Whether with reference to eating, drinking, or shopping the global Christmas is appropriated as Trini through the actions by which it is consumed. My conclusion would be that it is the success of Christmas as a bulwark against commercialism which is probably the single most important factor in accounting for its continued growth throughout the modern world. More or less exactly the opposite reason to that usually assumed to be the explanation for the growth of Christmas.

Towards a general theory of Christmas

This volume started with a brief discussion of the origins of Christmas in the fourth century. It was argued that this derived not from one but from three Roman festivals, the Kalends, Saturnalia, and Dies Natalis Solis Invicti, alongside new Christian elements based around the devotion to the family symbolized by the infant Jesus in the crib next to Joseph and Mary. I examined this not merely out of historical interest but because I want to suggest that this foundation remains significant in understanding Christmas through its subsequent history right until the twenty-first century. If we take for example, the relationship between the Kalends and Saturnalia we start with what could be described as twin-peaked festival. On the one hand rituals of inversion and on the other an emerging relationship between lavish expenditure and the domestic sphere. The third festival of Dies Natalis Solis Invicti adds a tradition of syncretism and incorporation, which turns the festival into what is still a treat for folklore studies. All of this has been related to three major contradictions in contemporary Christmas. Today it is the time of family togetherness and also of family quarrelling, the first true global festival and the last true local festival, the expression of materialism but also apparently its repudiation.

If we look historically but also at different contemporary regions we find in some places Christmas stands alone, and in other it retains the twin-peaked structure based in its relationship to some other festival. In Japan for example there is an important contrast with the celebration of New Year, while in Trinidad there is the pairing with and systematic opposition to Carnival. The same is true of European history where Christmas seems to come and go, but this is equally the case with Carnival. It is noticeable that if Christmas seems to be the festival that attracts swarms of folklorists, Carnival seems to drive anthropologists into a similar feeding frenzy. It is here that the topic of inversion receives its fullest treatment. Many analysts treat Carnival inversion in relatively simple terms, usually celebrating it for its objectification of some radical political alternative (Gilmore 1975 and to an extent Le Roy Ladurie 1981), or arguing that it provides cathartic support for a dominant ideology (DaMatta 1977, Eco 1984). More recently the analysis of Carnival has itself emphasized contradictions within its structure, especially since the influential article by Cohen (1982) on the Notting Hill Gate Carnival where he looks at the tension between its political potential as a time of inversion and that aesthetic form that gives it its appeal.

Although Cohen demonstrates the importance of ambivalence to the “success” of Carnival, the main attempt to account for it as integral remains the work of Bakhtin (1968) on Rabelais. This deals with that part of the medieval period during which the Church seemed quite tolerant of a series of inversion rituals, including the ridiculing of priests and of serious religion. Bakhtin argues that this was in large measure because they recognized laughter and mockery as a particular form of truth could also be a valid approach to the mysteries of the divine. Most especially it becomes a victory over fear and awe, as the terrifying is recognized as the merely grotesque (ibid.: 91). As Miles (1912) makes clear in his discussion of the attacks on the popular culture of early Christmas, there are strong continuities between the Roman festivals and elements of Christmas inversion found in the election of the



mock king and the boy bishop. But we also find the development of Carnival as an independent legacy of Saturnalia.

So looking at the sweep of European history Christmas at some points seems to incorporate and at other points to repudiate these Carnival-esque elements. In contemporary England there remains the cross-dressing and burlesque of the pantomime (Cinderella's passage from the domestic to the palace has been the traditionally most popular— Pimlott 1978: 155). Going to see a pantomime remains one of the near obligatory events of Christmas. But this is shunted off from the main festivities. Instead we have a considerable emphasis on the "serious" element of re-establishing the domestic, the sentimentality and nostalgia of family life, and the continuity of home and tradition. A similar situation exists with regard to Trinidad, where the clear separation of Christmas from Carnival means that we find an even more intense domesticity in the virtual devotion to the home and the larger project of descent continuity, in almost total opposition to the event-centered, street-based festivities of Carnival.

The West Indian case confirms the importance of this historical dynamic. The original celebration of Christmas by West Indian slaves has been the subject of a detailed study whose conclusion is mirrored in the title of a book *The Black Saturnalia* (Dirks 1987). During slavery, it was Christmas not Carnival which was the period of licensed mockery, inversion, and on occasion open revolt against oppression. In some West Indian islands Christmas retains elements of Carnival-esque inversion. But in Trinidad we see this evolve into the strict dualism between a festival of the street and the domestic. This two-century period in the West Indies seems thereby to replicate something of a two-millennium trajectory in Europe. Sometimes Christmas absorbs inversion and bacchanal while at other times it transforms into a more purist celebration of the domestic as serious and nostalgic or religious ritual.

Bakhtin's work suggests that festivities and their relationship to society should first be understood at the level of cosmology. I would propose this is true also for Christmas. Clearly as the celebration of the birth of Jesus the festival expresses a moral and normative order centered around an attempt to anthropomorphize the divinity in the form of the domestic family unit. Christmas literally domesticates the divine, and brings cosmological religion back within the space of the home and the ordinary family. It is a very different experience of religion and divinity from the intimidating cathedral or even the local church.

Christmas is then the festival of the family as microcosm. When I was a child the key ways in which English Christians celebrated Christmas was to combine the church worship of the divine family, the afternoon ritual of listening to the Queen on television representing the Royal family, and the actual celebration with their own family. The microcosm of family leads all the way up to the way Christianity separated from the single God of Judaism to create a family of Jesus, Mary, and Joseph. This ideal of the family as the microcosm of cosmology also corresponds to what I earlier described as the centripetal aesthetic, where as much of the outside world as possible is drawn into the domestic embrace and made safe and respectable. This is directly opposed to the centrifugal aesthetic of Carnival which empties out the home, dissolves the family and takes cosmology to the street and to the inversion of respectability.

This leads to the question of why at certain periods or in certain places Christmas incorporates Carnival while at other times and in other places it is created in direct opposition? I believe that the key factor is the sense of distance which a society feels exists between itself and the larger world inhabited as cosmology. In many times and places religion and belief are so strong and pervasive that there is little sense of society as such. We live merely as the transient embodiment of cosmology. In Frazerian terms, humanity is merely the temporary externalization on this planet that will then be reincorporated into the world of the divine. Carnival celebrates this cycle of renewal when the order of the world is overturned in an almost abstract logical form through Lords of Misrule and so forth. So Carnival is not separated out but is at the core of cosmology. This was true of the original Saturnalia during the period of the Roman republic or in the Rabelaisian images of medieval Christianity, or indeed in the pure opposition of the Black Saturnalia of the slave's Christmas, where oppression and suffering gave unity of purpose in opposition to those conditions. The emphasis is less on the home and more on the public sphere and the street. The overall message is affirmation of life within a secure cosmological understanding of its purpose.

The second version comes during periods when a community has instead a growing concern with itself as a society in some sense in decline or under threat. Here we may find a much stronger desire to objectify a solid sense of the social often at least preserved in the microcosm of the house or family. Typically in such cases we find that once the family and home is secured it becomes incorporative through gifting, feasting and other such strategies. The bright lights within the home illuminate and gradually dispel the dark cold and threatening outside forces, making them bow to the sociality within. From this base, it reaches out with the aim of incorporating some larger humanity as in its relationship to a global sphere and ultimately the divine of which it is the microcosm. In this incorporative mode the festival is highly syncretic.

These are only proposed as ideal types in the cultural logic of Christmas. Any given instance may only exhibit some of these aspects. We find Christmas that incorporates Carnival as in the Black Saturnalia, Christmas that is dualistically opposed to Carnival as in contemporary Trinidad and Christmas that abolishes Carnival as in contemporary Britain. The more self-conscious and fearful the society, the less that society seems able to tolerate Carnival and the more it seems to seek refuse in a purified serious Christmas. These tensions go right back to the origins of Christmas since actually the fourth century was precisely a time when the Romans were becoming fearful of loss, and uneasy about themselves as a modern society. They may not have known that someone would one day write of their "decline and fall," but certainly the fourth century AD had a strong sense of rapid change and transformation away from established customs associated with the "ancients" of the Roman republic.

In recent times with the growth of secularization and doubt we are unlikely to see again those condition of absolute and encompassing cosmology that gave rise to the more Rabelaisian and Carnival-esque Christmas. A place like Trinidad still manages to have the twin-peaked version where Carnival remains hugely important but through a dualistic relationship to Christmas as the festival of the domestic. But in a place like England which is now largely secular and saturated with



irony and doubt we see a modern Christmas that is dedicated, not to the enactment of cosmology, but to the protection of society or whatever is seen to remain of society. So the three topics discussed within this volume correspond to three strategies in a kind of social functionalism that would have appealed to Durkheim.

In Christmas we fully acknowledge the rise of commerce and materialism but in emulation of the reverse alchemy narrated by Dickens, we seek to reverse our orientation to money and turn gold back through gifting into the positive reinforcement of society. But that society is now pared back to its last vestige in the core family or such of it that can still be persuaded, at least on this one time in the year, to meet to partake in a shared ritual feast. Having retreated to that bedrock Christmas then tries to incorporate the world and reach out from the microcosm of our own family back upwards to the divine family. Finally, Christmas tries to achieve the same bridging role with respect to the world itself. Christmas along with New Year have become the times when we imagine almost the whole world is celebrating the same festival at the same time, yet Christmas has also become the last refuge of locality and folk tradition or family tradition so that the only place where people know how to celebrate Christmas properly is the place that we originally come from. All of which justified my original statement that Christmas seems to be at least as important today as it has ever been.

References

- Abrahams, R. 1983. *The man of words in the West Indies: Performance and the emergence of Creole culture*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press.
- Braithwaite, L. (1953) 1975. *Social stratification in Trinidad*. Mona: Institute of Social and Economic Research.
- Bakhtin, M. 1968. *Rabelais and his world*, trans. H. Iwolsky. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Barnes, T. 1981. *Constantine and Eusebius*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Barnett, J. 1954. *The American Christmas: A study of national culture*. New York: Macmillan.
- Belk, R. 1989. "Materialism and the modern U.S. Christmas," in E. Hirschman (ed), *Interpretive Consumer Research*. Provo, UT: Association for Consumer Research: 115–35.
- . 1993. *Materialism and the making of the modern American Christmas*. In D. Miller ed. *Unwrapping Christmas*. Oxford: Oxford University Press pp. 75–104.
- Bodenhorn, B. 1993. *Christmas present: Christmas public*. In D. Miller ed. *Unwrapping Christmas*. Oxford: Oxford University Press pp. 193–216.
- Caplow, T. 1984. "Rule enforcement without visible means: Christmas gift giving in Middletown," *American Journal of Sociology* 89/6: 1306–1323.
- Cheal, D. 1988. *The gift economy*. London: Routledge.
- Class, M. 2000. *The Roman cult of Mithras*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Cohen, A. 1982. "A polyethnic London Carnival as a contested cultural performance," *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 5: 23–42.

- Da Matta, R. 1977. "Constraint and license: A preliminary study of two Brazilian national rituals," in S. Moore and B. Meyerhoff eds., *Secular Rituals*. Assen: Van Gorcum: 244–64.
- Dirks R. 1987. *The Black Saturnalia: Conflict and its ritual expression on British West Indian slave plantations*. Gainesville, FL: University of Florida Press.
- Eco, U. 1984. "The frames of comic freedom," in U. Eco, V. Ivanov, and M. Rector eds., *Carnival*. The Hague: Mouton: 1–9.
- Garnsey, P. 1991. "Child rearing in Ancient Italy," in D. Kertzer and R. Saller eds., *The family in Italy*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Gilmore, D. 1975. "Carnival in Fvenmayor," *Journal of Anthropological Research* 31: 331–49.
- Gillis, J. 1997. *A world of their own making: A history of myth and ritual in family life*. Oxford: University of Oxford Press.
- Golby, J. 1981. "A history of Christmas," in *Popular culture: Themes and issues*. Milton Keynes: Open University Press: Block 1, Units 1/2.
- Golby, J, and A. Purdue. 1986. *The making of the modern Christmas*. London: Batsford.
- Goody, J. 1983. *The development of the family and marriage in Europe*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Halsberghe, G. 1972. *The cult of Sol Invictus*. Leiden: E. J. Brill.
- Hamlin, D. 2003. "The structures of toy consumption: bourgeois domesticity and demand for toys in nineteenth-century Germany," *Journal of Social History* 36.4: 857–869.
- Kertzer, D., and R. Saller. 1991. Eds. *The family in Italy*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Keens-Douglas, P. 1975. *When moon shine*. Port of Spain: College Press.
- . 1979. *Tell me again*. Port of Spain: Keensdee Productions Ltd.
- Klass, M. 1961. *East Indians in Trinidad*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Lane, C. 1981. *The rites of rulers*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Le Roy Ladurei, E. 1981. *Carnival in Romans*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- Libanius. 1977. *Selected Works*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Löfgren, O. 1993. "The great Christmas quarrel and other Swedish traditions," in Miller, D. ed. *Unwrapping Christmas*. Oxford: Oxford University Press: 193–234.
- McKay, G. 2008. "Consumption, Coca-colonisation, cultural resistance—and Santa Claus" in Whiteley, S. ed. *Christmas, ideology and popular culture*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press: 50–67.
- Mauss, M. 1954. *The gift*. London: Cohen and West.
- Miles, C. 1912. *Christmas in ritual and tradition, Christian and Pagan*. London: T. Fisher Unwin.
- Miller, D. 1987. *Material culture and mass consumption*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.
- . 1993a. *A theory of Christmas*. In Miller, D. ed. *Unwrapping Christmas*. Oxford: Oxford University Press: 3–37.



- . 1993b. *Christmas against materialism in Trinidad*. In Miller, D. ed. *Unwrapping Christmas*. Oxford: Oxford University Press: 134–153.
- . 1993c. *Unwrapping Christmas*. Oxford: Oxford University Press
- . 1994. *Modernity: An ethnographic approach*. Oxford: Berg
- . 1998 *A theory of shopping*. Cambridge: Polity
- Moeran, B. and L. Skove. 1993. *Cinderella Christmas: Kitsch, consumerism, and youth in Japan*. I Miller, D. ed. *Unwrapping Christmas*. Oxford: Oxford University Press: 105–133.
- Naipaul, V. S. 1958. *The suffrage of Elvira*. London: Andre Deustch.
- Nabarz. P. 2005. *The mysteries of Mithras*. Rochester VT: Inner Traditions.
- Perry, J. 2002. “The Madonna of Stalingrad: Mastering the (Christmas) past and West German national identity after World War II,” *Radical History Review* 83: 6–27.
- . 2005. “Nazifying Christmas: Political culture and popular celebration in the Third Reich,” *Central European History* 38: 572–605.
- . 2010 *Christmas in Germany: A cultural history*. Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press.
- Pimlott, J. 1978. *The Englishman’s Christmas*. Hassocks: Harvester Press.
- Rawson, B. 1986. “The Roman family,” in B. Rawson ed. *The family in Ancient Rome*. London: Croom Helm: 1–57.
- Ruland, J. 1978. *Christmas in Germany*. Bonn: Hohwacht Verlag.
- Rycenga, J. 2008. *Religious controversies over Christmas*. In Whiteley, S. ed. *Christmas, ideology and popular culture*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press: 71–87.
- Scullard, H. 1981. *Festivals and ceremonies of the Roman Republic*. London: Thames & Hudson.
- Shaw, B. 1991. “The cultural meaning of death: Age and gender in the Roman family,” in D. Kertzer and R. Saller eds. *The family in Italy*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press: 66–90.
- Simmel, G. 1900. *Philosophie des Geldes*, Leipzig: Duncker & Humblot.
- Taylor, S. 1977. *Parang in Trinidad*. Port of Spain: National Cultural Council.
- Vertovec, S. 1992. *Hindu Trinidad*. London: Macmillan.
- Warner, M. 1976. *Alone of all her sex*. London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson.
- Weightman, G. and S. Humphries. 1987. *Christmas past*. London: Sidgwick & Jackson.
- Wilk, R. 1990. “Consumer goods as a dialogue about development,” *Culture and History* 7: 79–100.
- Wilson, P. 1973. *Crab antics: The social anthropology of English Speaking Negro societies of the Caribbean*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Whiteley, S. Ed. 2008. *Christmas, ideology and popular culture*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press

Winer, L., and E. Aguilar. 1991. "Spanish influence in the lexicon of Trinidadian Creole," *Nieunse West-Indisehe Gids/Nens West Indian Guide*, 65: 153–91.

Noël: un point de vue anthropologique

Comment se fait-il que Noël semble prendre de l'ampleur dans le monde lorsque les autres festivités sont en déclin? Pourquoi les gens soulignent-ils leurs rituels locaux alors qu'il s'agit d'une fête globale? Est-ce une célébration dont les valeurs ont été détruites par le matérialisme? Quel est le rapport entre ce repas de famille festif et la famille divine à laquelle il rend hommage? Ces questions se prêtent à une analyse anthropologique. C'est pour cette raison qu'en 1993, j'ai dirigé la publication d'un ouvrage intitulé *Unwrapping Christmas*, publié par l'Oxford University Press. Dans cette collection d'articles, j'avais obtenu la permission de Claude Lévi-Strauss d'inclure la première traduction de l'article "Le Père Noël supplicié." Par la suite, en réponse à une requête de Suhrkamp Verlag, qui a publié certains de mes ouvrages en allemand, ce manuscrit fit partie du lancement d'une série de publications digitales de travaux universitaires significatifs et accessibles. Ceci est la première publication du manuscrit en anglais.

Daniel MILLER is Professor of Anthropology at University College London. He is the author/editor of thirty-nine volumes, almost all based upon ethnographic research.

*Daniel Miller
Department of Anthropology
University College London
14 Taviton Street
London WC1H 0BW
d.miller@ucl.ac.uk*