



Unearthing the Roots of Food Gifts in Japan: A Tradition or an Invented Tradition?

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Abstract

Gift-giving is a gesture that cuts across cultures as a universally performed phenomenon, practiced in order to position oneself within the framework of a society as a social being, by building bonds and reinforcing relationships. Beyond the belief of gift-giving as a purely altruistic act performed out of intimacy and affection of the giver towards the receiver, it is a habit with hidden motives threaded to it, in-filling it with layers of social, psychological, cultural, and economic meanings, thereby turning it away from an act of innocence. In Japan, gift-giving is a frequently and celebratedly carried out societal function, observed under rigid rules and regulations. The gift-giving occasions in Japan can be based on a tradition rooted in religion, some developed through the influence of the West and other cultures, and the remaining newly emerging as a reflection of the changing social behaviour and patterns. In that sense, one is critical of certain gift-giving practices in today's Japan, and is caught up within the network of both traditions and invented traditions. The present study is an attempt to explore the escalating exchange of food gifts in Japan, and to critically look into the trend as an outcome of Japanese tradition or a tradition invented to boost the sales of food industries in Japan.

Keywords: Gift-giving, Japan, Food gifts, Tradition, Invented tradition, Food Industries

Virtually any resource, whether tangible or intangible, can be transformed into a gift. Objects, services, and experiences may be conferred as gifts. The transformation from resource to gift occur through the vehicles of social relationships and giving occasions. Gifts are frequently context-bound, and canons of propriety tailored to specific situations... Designations of "gift" may arise through cultural convention, or through such directed intervention strategies as advertising.

(Sherry 160)

These lines included in “Gift Giving in Anthropological Perspective” as a way of defining gifts capture the very essence of the concept of gift. It conveys the idea of what constitutes a gift and how any resource can be transformed into a gift depending upon the relationship shared between the giver and the recipient and the gift-giving occasion. It also sheds light on the fact that gifts attain their meaning only from the context within which the exchange occurs, therefore marking it as a context-bound phenomenon, defining itself with respect to the specific situations in which it is exchanged. This can also be read as a practice that is culturally rooted and ritually performed based on traditions of a particular region and also shaped by the strategies of advertising that modify itself in pace with the far-changing society by capturing the most recent trends. The primary function of gift-giving as a universal phenomenon is to position oneself within the framework of a society as a social being, by building bonds and reinforcing relationships. But, the gesture of gift-giving is infused with a collection of cultural, social, psychological, and economic dimensions, thereby turning it into a highly symbolic and semiotic system with hidden motives and also taking it beyond an act of innocence performed out of affection and intimacy of the giver towards the recipient.

Gift-giving in Japan with its unique position in the history of Japanese culture is a frequently and celebratedly carried out societal function, observed under rigid rules and regulations, thereby making the practice “a minor institution in Japan, with complex rules defining who should give to whom, on what occasions he should give, what sort of gift is appropriate on a given occasion, and how the gift should be presented” (Befu 445). In Japan, gift wrapping is equally significant as what is presented, where the colours chosen, the type of knot used, and the decoration attached (*noshi* is attached or printed only for good occasions) are deeply loaded with meanings. The number of gifts presented is also of utmost importance, where gifts in pairs are considered as a symbol of luckiness and gifts presented as four (it is pronounced similar to the word death in Japanese) and nine (pronounced similar to the word suffering) are extremely unlikely.

Every nation is caught in the obligation of reciprocity in gift-giving, and Japan is strictly rooted to this act of reciprocity in its gift-

giving tradition, where one receives numerous gifts depending upon the occasion, but at the same time, is expected to close the cycle by reciprocating a gift of equal value as a sense of expressing gratitude towards the presenter. While referring to the system of *potlatch* in Northwest America, Marcel Mauss writes – “The obligation to reciprocate constitutes the essence of the potlatch...”, in addition to the other two obligations – the obligation to give and the obligation to receive (53).

In Japan, depending upon the relationship shared between the giver and the receiver and the motivation behind the presentation, the gift-giving tradition can be categorised into two – *okurimono* (gifts offered to those of inferior or equal status with the aim of seeking love, respect, obedience, and support) and *shinmotsu* (gifts offered out of respect to those of superior status with the motive of seeking support and protection) (Guerin 3). The tradition of *shinmotsu* existed long back as a religious custom as offerings to the god, expecting support, protection, good health, and well-being as rewards. The customary gift-giving practices of Japan include *ochugen* (the July or half-yearly gift tradition), *oseibo* (the December or year-end gift tradition), *omiyage* (gifts presented to friends and relatives after returning from a trip), *temiyage* (thank-you gifts), *senbetsu* (farewell gifts), *okaeshi* (return gifts), *otoshidama* (New Year gifts), *omimai* (gifts for the sick), *kekkon* (marriage gifts), *iwai* (celebratory or congratulatory gifts), *kouden* (funeral offerings or condolence gift) and other gifts like Birthday gifts, Christmas gifts, Valentine’s day and White day gifts. The gift-giving tradition in Japan has undergone tremendous transitions accommodating the changes within the modernised Japan – 1) the tradition of gift-giving traced back to the ancient rituals of offering gifts to deity has transformed into a custom practiced in a more secularised fashion marking the loss of religious significance in gift-giving, 2) the idea of ‘collective’ gift-giving (presented as a common gift to a family) changed into an individual based system of gift-giving (gifts presented between individuals to express affection), 3) the gift-giving based on the concept of *giri* (the social obligation to give) turned into a more “ulteriorly motivated” practice, and 4) a weakly developed altruism replaced a “self-sacrificing devotion” for reciprocity (Befu 455). The present study aims to analyse the changing gift-giving behaviours, explore the

escalating exchange of food gifts, and critically look into these trends as an outcome of Japanese tradition or a tradition invented to boost the sales of food industries in Japan.

Escalating Exchange of Food Gifts in Japan

One of the most common forms of gift-giving is the presentation of food. Food forms such an important part of gift-giving for a number of reasons: Food is an ‘intimate’ gift, implying comfort and closeness. Food is a primary need for humans and offering it implies emotional support. And food is a gift which covers a wide range of prices, and can thus be made appropriate for almost any occasion.

(Ashkenazi 1)

The above lines explain the reasons behind why food gifts qualify as the most appropriate item for gift-giving in Japan. Compared to other countries, Japan intertwined with its rich history of widely celebrated food culture, exhibits an escalating trend of food gifts exchanged as the most common gift item for their gift-giving tradition. A typical *omiyage* (translated as “local produce”) is usually cookies, candies, cakes, alcohol and other snacks specific to that region visited, wrapped and brought to be gifted to one’s friends and relatives. The gifts preferred for *oseibo* gift season are mainly confectioneries, snacks, special fruits and alcohol, selected depending upon the taste of the receiver in mind. Valentine’s day is uniquely designed in Japan, where women are obliged to give gifts to men on that day, and in return, men reciprocate their love through gifts on White day, which is celebrated a month later. These are boom days for the food industries in Japan, where chocolates, candies and cookies form the commonly exchanged gift items. In contemporary Japan, Valentine’s day is not restricted to couples alone and is again an added advantage for the food industries, where there are different types of chocolates sold as gifts – *Giri Choco* (Obligation chocolates), *Honmei Choco* (True love chocolates), *Fami Choco* (Chocolates for family members), *Tomo Choco* (Chocolates for friends), *My Choco* (Chocolates for oneself) and *Gyaku Choco* (Reverse chocolates) (“Valentine’s”). In general, there are a handful of occasions in Japan where food gifts are exchanged as part of the gift-giving tradition.

In a research summary titled “Food Gift Market in Japan: Key Research Findings 2017” by Yano Research Institute Ltd. in 2018, one of the key findings is stated as ‘domestic food gift market in 2017 rises to 4,100 billion yen’ (1). According to the report, it shows a decline in the practice of *oseibo* and *ochugen*, but a more casual exchange of food gifts became the trend, thereby leading to the estimation that the food gift exchange market will exhibit a rise to reach 4,150 billion yen in 2018. The trend was observed in food items like sweets/confectionery, processed food, fresh food, condiment/cooking oil, beverages and liquor. The gradual rise in the domestic food gift market size was researched from the year 2014 to 2018, marking the market size as 36,920 (Hundred Million Yen) in 2014, 38,460 in 2015, 39,900 in 2016, 41,000 in 2017, and 41,500 (estimated) in 2018. A recent report notes that “Although there were positive sales movements for mid-year summer gift season (*ochugen*), for luxury products, and the highest ever for e-commerce, overall sales remained sluggish as the number of store-visiting customers decreased due to the harsh rainy season, the resurgence of COVID-19, and deconcentrating large summer sales at stores. Data from the Japan Department Store Association showed food sales down by 11.5 percent from July 2019” (“Japan”).

Even though the practice of food gifts being exchanged showcased an upward trend, there is a parallel trend where gift-giving occasions are not strictly followed. As discussed earlier, there were tremendous transitions in this tradition in modern Japan. *Oseibo* and *ochugen*, which is close to the heart of Japanese people as two traditional gift-giving seasons in Japan have shown a decline, where they are not followed as they were in the past. It became less prevalent among the youth as well as in the cities, due to the changing thoughts and perceptions of the youth and the urban dwellers in Japan and mostly remains strong among older generations and in rural Japan. Another reason for the declining trend is that a part of the population is denying gift-giving as an obligation to be followed and instead attempting to make it a more intimate exchange out of affection. Moreover, they believe that one shall not await the gift-giving season but immediately reciprocate and express their feelings through gifts (Kyle). The chocolate industry is facing a decline in sales when Valentine’s day gift-giving is beginning to be seen as a

more gendered gift-giving ritual, where a recent report reads – “Shifting gender politics and the corona virus have combined to spell the possible end of the Japanese Valentine’s Day custom of women giving chocolates to male colleagues” (McCurry). But the day is turning as a way to gift oneself, rather than exchanging chocolates with men, thereby maintaining the sales of the chocolate industries even when encountering a slight decline (Minowa et al. 53). Even when the gift-giving traditions are fading in Japan due to many reasons as discussed, the trend of food gifts selected as an item for exchange is rising according to the reports. The pandemic conditions are adding fuel to the fire, where gift-giving seasons witnessed a decrease in the number of customers visiting the stores.

Food Gifts as a Tradition

The origin and development of gift-giving as a tradition in Japan can be pinned down to a supernatural past, where people made offerings to the god. The study of this same past leads us to the reason why food gifts are popular in Japan and is revived today as part of Japanese tradition, as those offerings were mainly in the form of food. Even today, this custom of offering food is practised in Japan, where in many houses, food is offered to deceased family members and village shrines, and the celebration of New Year also involves offering rice cakes to god. *Naorai*, understood in the present day as a feast scheduled after a festival at the shrine, where they are made to share the sacred food and drink, was historically considered as food gifts to god, and they were returned by god to the people to be shared together, as a way of transferring the divine powers and blessing them. Food in the form of a communal meal is thus considered to be infilled with certain magical powers, and sharing food is also a symbol of transferring good energy and health. In Japan, offering food gifts to a person in bad health is common, where it is believed that the person is cured by the power of the healthy through the food gift given.

The motive behind the use of food as a major item for gift-giving in today’s Japan going back to this system of commensality is clearly stated by Befu – “It is because communion with supernatural beings was achieved primarily through commensality that offerings to gods were, and still are, largely foodstuff, and also that even now food is

considered as the traditional type of gift in Japan and that in fact it is the most popular type of gift” (448). Thus, the preference and love of Japanese people for food gifts is strongly rooted in the tradition of commensality, where they are exchanged as a way of transferring love and good health.

Food Gifts as an Invented Tradition

“Invented Tradition” is a term coined in *The Invention of Tradition* (1983) (edited by Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger), where it states that,

traditions which appear or claim to be old are often quite recent in origin and sometimes invented... 'Invented tradition' is taken to mean a set of practices, normally governed by overtly or tacitly accepted rules and of a ritual or symbolic nature, which seek to inculcate certain values and norms of behaviour by repetition, which automatically implies continuity with the past. (Hobsbawm 1)

He also explains how in the rift between “constant changes and innovation of the modern life” and in an “attempt to structure at least some parts of the social life” as unchanging, invented traditions are becoming popular in standing between the two.

Invented traditions are part and parcel of all spheres of life, where in every society there are a number of customs practiced in the name of tradition, but on a deeper analysis, unfolds itself as a habit quite recent in origin, developed to ensure continuity with the past or as an effort to make certain things invariable when the modern world is constantly changing. Traditions are often interconnected with a sense of belonging and affect, and therefore, representing tradition, certain practices are created as traditions for political plays in various fields of activities. The same trend is visible in the case of food industries with the commodification of nostalgia, where unusual connections are constructed between a particular cuisine and an event of the past, and sold as traditional food items to boost sales. In Japan, gift-giving is followed as part of its tradition, but there were reports suggesting the escalating trend in the exchange of food gifts, even when the gift-giving tradition itself is fading in Japan. As discussed in the previous part, the food gifts in Japan have a tradition of their own, so the rising

demand for food gifts in the background of declining gift-giving tradition in Japan, can be understood as the way food gifts are reinvented as a tradition, as a part of market strategies to increase the sales.

Oseibo and *ochugen* are considered as traditional Japanese customs, which claims its origin in the 1600s (Edo Period), where people exchanged gifts to those they are indebted to, or it is said to have its root set in the ancient practice of food offerings to god or ancestral offerings. On one side, there is an attempt to guard this tradition by the countryside dwellers and older generations that there is an increase in the food gifts purchased according to the reports. On the other side, both these traditions are fading away. *Oseibo* is fading as a tradition because

many younger Japanese think of *oseibo* gift exchanges as something that their parents do, or that their relatives in the countryside enjoy, but not something that applies to them. The original meaning of a “thank you” has been weakened, and instead the expectation of exchanging *oseibo* has come by many to be viewed as an unwelcome and burdensome obligation. (Kopp)

This is true with both the traditions, where they are facing a fall in practice in the urban Japan and among the youngsters. But still, the food industries are not economically suffering, as they were successful in playing a game that captures the youngsters, where they neglecting *oseibo* as an obligation, is today caught in a more private exchange of Christmas presents, as both happens in the month of December. Beyond the idea of food gifts being exchanged, the Christmas dinner that has entered the Japanese tradition, is a tradition invented. For Japanese people, a Christmas without cakes and Kentucky Fried Chicken dinner, is very upsetting. The economic boom in Japan during the 1940s and 50s, opened Japan towards the necessity to emulate Western culture in food, fashion etc., and in the rapid globalisation period during the 1970s and 80s, Japan witnessed the sprouting of many Western food brands in Tokyo. KFC found its first outlet in Japan in 1970, and by 1981, more than 300 KFC stores were opened. It was easy to implement the KFC Christmas dinner in Japan, as KFC chicken had a flavor similar to many traditional

Japanese dishes as well as promoted enjoying a family meal together, which is core to the practice of eating together in Japan. So, with the introduction of KFC Christmas dinner, from the 1970s onwards, we have Japanese people celebrating Christmas with a KFC meal together, which later became synonymous with Christmas in Japan and thus, a part of Japanese tradition (Springer). Like Christmas, which was introduced to Japan under the western influence, Valentine's day in Japan possesses a similar history. Valentine's day in Japan has a unique history as discussed earlier, even when it is a western imported culture. It entered the Japanese tradition by being different from the usual Valentine's day procedures in the West. It is a day when women exchange chocolates to men, and men have a separate day to reciprocate the gifts received a month later on March 14 - White Day. In a study "Social Change and Gendered Gift-Giving Rituals: A Historical Analysis of Valentine's Day in Japan", one could understand how the marketing strategies for advertising Valentine's day gifts changed in response to the changing "social values, consumer ideology, gender roles and power relationships in Japanese society over the past 50 years" (Minowa et al. 45). With slight changes added to the advertisements reflecting the changing gender politics in Japan, the new ways of celebrating Valentine's day entered into the tradition by ensuring a continuity with the past to be treated as a tradition, but on a deeper thought they are traditions invented to bring in a rise in market sales. At a point when the practice of Valentine's day gift-giving began to be frowned upon as a gendered ritual, the markets manufactured different chocolates, when women showed an increased tendency to gift their friends and themselves on Valentine's day. *Omiyage* is another tradition close to Japanese people, which is believed to be rooted in the ancient custom of travelling long distances to offer prayers at shrines, where they buy local goods or religious objects to be given to their relatives and neighbours. The tradition helped many industries to achieve an economic boom, where they are basically destined with the duty to create traditions and are expected to help evoke certain food memories in the people who consumes it. Every place has its own unique local food items wrapped as gifts, where there is a direct link between the place and the food item, that a particular food item consumed is expected to evoke memories of that place (Ashkenazi 1). Even when people are caught in a set of false memories created

through such constructed connections, they are exposing the Japanese society to its wide variety of food items and thereby, unite people through food in a world where people are having a compartmentalised existence in a modern society. Also, people segregated by geographical boundaries in Japan began to bring in local cuisines unique to their region as a way of shaping local histories through food as a reaction to the growing metropolitanism and modernisation, which is said to erase traditional Japanese food memories (Ashkenazi 4). So, in the name of a tradition, marketers are shaping our food choices and defining what constitutes traditional Japanese cuisines, which can be seen as an example for how a collection of invented traditions resides within a tradition.

So, many gift-giving practices that lie interconnected to the Japanese culture and believed to be part of Japanese gift-giving tradition today, are recently created as a continuation of the traditional gift-giving practices in Japan. Whenever the society undergoes changes, new gift-giving practices were invented as a continuation to the traditional practices, to suit the needs and desires of the society. This is true with the food industries, where they are in a constant race to find a space in the modern market and in the minds of the consumers, by shaping them according to the perceptions of the society, so as to be with the unstable and changing modern world. The link they reinvent between tradition and food items, is a technique to boost the sales by reviving lost memories in the consumers through such connections made. It is the same reason behind food gifts turning as a popular gift item for the gift-giving occasions in Japan.

Conclusion

The paper explored the unique gift-giving practice in Japan, the different types of gift-giving occasions, the recent reports stating the rising trend in the exchange of food gifts even when the gift-giving as a tradition is falling apart, and more importantly, it was an attempt to critically look into the escalating trends in the exchange of food gifts and understand whether it was based on Japanese tradition or an invented tradition. Japanese people are framed into a complex combination of both traditions and invented traditions, where they practice them as part of their tradition. Many gift-giving traditions in

Japan are based on influences from the West or invented part of the market strategies, beyond its rootedness in Japanese religion. The study helps locate various gift-giving traditions in Japan as an interwoven network of traditions and invented traditions. Both Christmas and Valentine's day are celebrations imported from the Western culture, where they have entered the Japanese culture undergoing many changes, to qualify as a celebration unique to Japan. With the synonymous connection Christmas established with KFC Christmas dinner and the modification made to Valentine's day as a day for women and developing a day called White day for the men of the society, Japan was making them unique to Japanese tradition, where one very clearly knows that they are invented traditions. Similarly, the study sheds light on how in the name of tradition, many traditions are invented by ensuring continuity with the past events, reflecting the changing social values and ideologies, as in Valentine's day. How invented traditions are created within a tradition, was looked upon through the practice of *omiyage* in Japan, where it helps understand the way market shapes our notion of traditional cuisines by evoking false memories. As Friedrich Nietzsche defines truth as "a lie agreed upon", "tradition is an agreed-upon recourse to elements of the past, so that they may constitute the present" (Ashkenazi 4). Thus, the gift-giving practices are shaped within the complex network of both Japanese tradition and invented traditions, thereby blurring the distinction between the two.

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