



WITH LOVE, FROM RUSSIA: THE ART OF GIFTING

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Abstract

To give a gift within Western culture is not an expectation when building new connections and networks. There is a disconnect between building new friendships and exchanging gifts. Gifting is often misinterpreted within Western cultures as a bribe or an aggressive push to receive a desired gain. In Russia and other former Soviet republics gifting is an ingrained practice that establishes and strengthens relationships. In this paper the origin and purpose of gifting is explained and the applied method to better understand the role of gift-giving is borrowed from Jennifer Patico (2002) fieldwork approach and justification. Following the method section is a discussion of appropriate gifts for specific occasions and ending with a conclusion that encourages the process of gift-giving to be considered a symbol of enhanced solidarity.

Keywords: Gift-giving, cultural traditions, Soviet customs, Russian culture, networking

Introduction

What does it mean to give a gift in Russia? Generally, gifts are a positive form of exchange during national and religious holidays or among friends, family, and acquaintances for particular reasons, but have been interpreted as in acts of bribery. In terms of Russian gift-giving, there are some specific details that make the act of gift-giving a unique and carefully crafted form of art. A gift is a sign (знак

– знак') of respect, gratitude, and a step toward building one's relationship with the gift-receiver. The most important part of gift-giving, in Russian culture, is the giver's intention and personal investment when selecting the perfect gift. The act of presenting a gift in Russian culture is described as gifting by the word дарить [darit'] rather than giving – давать [davat'] The sole act of gifting has its unique placement within Russian culture; the act

of giving greatly differs from gifting.

This paper examines the purpose and origin of giving particular types of gifts during and after the Soviet Union. The purpose of the paper is to explain how Russian culture has created a type of communication that places great significance on the act of gift-giving. Furthermore, this paper provides a brief explanation of different types of acceptable gifts to give for each occasion.

Is a Gift Intended to «Feed» or «Bribe» One's Relationships?

In the 2009 New York Times article «Lifting the Lid on Russia's Art of Lavish Gift Giving», Andrew Kramer presents a common misunderstanding about the important custom in Russia's gift-giving tradition when referring to Aleksandr Y. Khochinsky, a businessman, «who specialized in providing high-class grease for the best-connected palms in the government and other high-level circles», says A. Kramer [2, p.1] and who also took great pride in his talent in finding the «perfect gift» A. Kramer [2, p.1]. What Kramer misunderstands about Khochinsky's intention of gift-giving is the honor and pride that is generally inherent in Russia's culture of gift-exchange. The intention to present an appropriate gift is not an act of bribing, but an act of securing and nurturing a new or growing relationship. To gift (дарить - darit') implies the act of nurturing a political or social affiliation, or even to honor religious customs within communities that have deep historical and regional roots in the practice (e.g. throughout post-Soviet states).

In Russian history gifts have transformed from a governmental practice of rewarding political and military officials, to a more publicly shared practice. Before

Catherine II, military or national leaders would be honored and distinguished for their national and foreign military combat and service by receiving an award (gift). However, Catherine II initiated the public practice of gifting by presenting gifts to her grandchildren, such as silver rubles to establish a positive relationship with them and not necessarily award them. The awards that military and government officials would normally receive for their service were rings and bracelets (known as bracers – наручи), golden or silver goblets, cups, expensive fur coats, or caftans. A gift was considered a badge of honor. Moreover, in the seventeenth century, the horse-carriage was a «high-status gift that would be exchanged between royal and imperial rulers» says O. Dmitrieva and T. Murdoch [3, p.160]. Also, as early as 1599 Elizabeth I sent a lavish mechanical organ to the Grand Turk Sultan Mohamed III for his harem in the Topkapı Palace. The tradition of receiving valuable gifts from the Tsar or other royalty is preserved in the Russian language in the expression, шуба с барского плеча (a fur-coat from a lordly shoulder), which remains as a popular saying used to highlight the value of a gift. However, this process and ideology of honorable gift-giving changed when Peter the Great, during the 18th century, adopted the European system of governing and eliminated «rewards» in the form of financial payments (наградные) among his advisers. He extended the practice to awarding medals and special promotions that indicated moving up the ladder in one's career.

More generally, gifts have transformed into a common practice of exchange that symbolizes gratitude and respect between the giver and the receiver; however, in recent centuries it has been less concerned with the previous practice

of rewarding someone and more about nurturing one's current relationships. Gifts have always been considered culturally correct in Russia to exchange gifts or favors in order to build and maintain one's *блат* (a network of connections). Moreover, gift-giving was more prevalent during the Soviet era when the country experienced a deficit in common goods and people needed to bargain for a wide range of goods and services at all levels of society.

Furthermore, the act of gifting is deeply ingrained into Russian culture and can be identified in Russian literature throughout different periods of time. One example, from the 18th century is the story, *History of Alexander: The Russian nobleman* [4], which depicts the protagonist presenting to his beloved an engagement ring. Moreover, numerous Russian fairy-tales have the same storyline of a magical gift being gifted and received as an important and pivotal point of the story's plot and the protagonist's fortune. During this time in history, the subject of donating lavish or simple gifts to others in times of celebrations or out of reward became more common, and the exchange of women's crafts, rings, and miniature portraits (lockets that could be worn as medallions) represented a form of positive attention or love that had become a symbol of a loving and lasting relationship.

This is not to say that gifts are still not exchanged among political figures. Kramer refers to the Russian practice of gift-giving, in the terms of writer Nikolai Gogol, as giving «greyhound puppies» stated in A. Kramer's *New York times* article [2, p. 1]. The term refers to Gogol's character, Lyapkin Tyapkin, in his comedy *The Inspector-General*. The author ridicules this character, a judge, for taking bribes in the form of greyhound puppies instead of money. Although Kramer understands

Gogol's depiction of gifting within his play, Kramer fails to fully understand the deeply-rooted practice of Russian gift-giving. It is inaccurate to always consider Russian practice of gift-giving as a bribe. The art of gifting is a serious and important manner for Russians and the mere act is a great sign of respect that is expected in order to maintain social graces within one's networks (*блат*). In history, the Persian Shah understood this Russian custom and sent a giant elephant to Peter the Great at the end of the seventeenth century in order to persuade Russia to join forces against the Ottoman Empire. Similar acts of gift-giving occurred when the Grand Duke of Moscow gave the Ambassador Herberstein precious furs, hats, boots and gold in order to nurture their friendly ties [5].

Methods

Similarly, Jennifer Patico's fieldwork, which is outlined in detail within her article, *Chocolate and Cognac: Gifts and the Recognition of Social Worlds in Post-Soviet Russia*, explains that giving a gift should be understood as a «sign of [giving positive] attention» says J. Patico [1, p.1]. The post-Soviet culture expresses «an appropriate balance of personalization and anonymity in exchange relations», says J. Patico [1, p. 1] which constitutes a construction or a recognition of perceived grounds of social commonality. Patico's article is a discussion of her fieldwork of interviewing teachers in St. Petersburg where she lived and stayed long enough to learn the etiquette of giving the perfect gift. The act of gifting one's teachers, as Patico makes clear, is not a bribe for good grades but an act of recognizing and rewarding «good work» [1, p. 1]. A gift also implies that the giver is «nurturing» [1, p. 1] their relationship with the receiver to remain on good terms. The importance

of being recognized signifies that the receiver is being acknowledged as a «social person» [1, p. 2] who has demonstrated good social graces to the giver and has «made herself [or himself] known as a valuable social actor» [1, p. 2]. The public act of gifting demonstrates «the morality of sincere interpersonal relations and attends to (selected) people as they are situated in contexts of sociability» [1, p. 3] Patico's article suggests that this stance as a «valuable social actor» [1, p. 3] establishes the receiver as a respected and worthwhile participant of the community in which they are interacting, whether it be political, communal, or professional. Since money has become the desirable commodity in the post-Soviet society students would gift their teachers with lavish gifts that only good money could buy.

Patiko argues is that prior to the collapse of the Soviet Union, society had relied on *блат* (social networks) and people would buy gifts for their friends when they found something they liked, because the logic was «when you see some good detergent and know your neighbor uses it – why not buy it?» [1, p. 3] especially since commodities were scarce and hard to procure. However, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the West made commodities more accessible and therefore, the scarce item became money. The increased value and demand for money arose when the access to commodities increased and the prices for these commodities became higher. As one woman simply put it to Patiko during one of her interviews, «now we depend more on money than our friends [because can your] friends pay your rent?» [1, p. 2].

Discussion

Gift-giving the Perfect Gift

In Russian culture (including all the

republics of the former Soviet Union) giving the perfect gift implies that the giver understands that gift-giving is not arbitrary but «indexical» and a necessary act to establish and maintain one's position within their various networks.

The art of giving a gift requires attention to detail, clear understanding of the giver-receiver's relationship (or the type of relationship the giver wants to establish), and most importantly, «draws on understanding the needs of the receiver», says O. Dmitrieva and T. Murdoch [3, p. 353]. After the late 90s (1998-1999), citizens of the former Soviet Union found themselves in a position where gifts were necessary to survive. Instead of trivial gifts (e.g. stationery paper, knickknacks, picture frames, decorative desk items) people needed and expected staples that had utility. Such items would be described as neutral and universal as well as traditional gifts which would include boxes of chocolate, bottles of alcoholic beverages (e.g. cognac for men, champagne or wine for women), and even cosmetics (for women). Gifts that are considered neutral and traditional are best for individuals that are not well acquainted with each other. These would be the items that could serve another purpose. For example, if a woman did not like the wine she was given, she could easily serve that wine to guests or give it as a gift to someone else. As for flowers, a woman can decorate her kitchen or dining room table with the flowers or even dry them to make her own potpourri. However, for a more prominent individual, such as a doctor or professor, a gift that is unique and difficult to find was cherished (e.g. handmade rugs, foreign alcoholic beverages, antique books, quality pens, or any rare commodity that is useful).

Although neutral gifts are not personal they are considered necessary and should

be well thought-out. Generally, most Russian occasions require some form of gift-exchange and it is expected among all individuals present (e.g. extended family members and especially children expect neutral gifts). When gifts are given within one's current or growing network (блат) the giver should think of the receiver's family (especially their children) and present them with neutral gifts such as candy, toys, unique or rare books or other useful, yet scarce items. The art of picking a neutral or traditional gift is no small task and should be done with keen attention and care.

An example that demonstrates the time and detail invested in buying a gift with good intentions are flowers. The giver's intentions are displayed through their gift. A common traditional and neutral gift to give is flowers, but the amount of thought and detail invested in picking the appropriate flowers is extensive. It is considered bad luck when a giver demonstrates minimal or lack of good and well-invested intentions when selecting and presenting a gift. First, the number of flowers is crucial. One must always give an odd number of flowers and never an even amount (which is reserved for funerals). Second, picking the appropriate color of the flowers is also very important. For example, the depiction of yellow flowers foreshadows a gloomy future of sadness or deceit. Specifically, in Mikhail Bulgakov's novel, *The Master and Margarita*, the Bulgakov subtly foreshadows the story's tragic ending of the love story between the protagonist and his beloved by intentionally describing the color of the flowers Margarita was carrying in the scene of their first meeting:

« She was carrying repulsive, alarming yellow flowers in her hand. Devil knows what they are called, but for some reason they are the first to appear in Moscow. And

these flowers stood out clearly against her black spring coat. She was carrying yellow flowers! Not a nice color». written in M. Bulgakov's novel [6, p.2].

Bulgakov used the color (yellow) of the flowers as a symbol of their tragic separation. However, the color of red roses implies love and passion and pink flowers have a soft implication of commitment and a more friendly association of caring for someone. Lastly, the type of flower being given is equally, if not more important. In the springtime, tulips are favorable over roses, but other popular choices are irises, freesias, daffodils, or lilacs. The amount of detail (as demonstrated with giving flowers) is important for particular holidays that honor the nation's history, a male or female's duties to their family and their country, as well as religious or cultural traditions (during and after the Soviet era) when building or establishing new or old relationships.

Conclusion

The importance of giving gifts (gifting) is not merely a 'Russian' concept, but rather a geo-cultural custom of the East. The former Soviet Union's republics (e.g.in Central Asia and the Caucasus) are still, if not more dedicated, to the custom of gift-giving. It is culturally expected that the gifter pays close attention to the intrinsic details when gifting someone, when intending to expand one's networks (блат) or when initiating and maintaining relationships (personally or professionally).

As Pactio simply states, «gift practice [is a part] of an ever-evolving socioeconomic «cosmology» of sorts, through which post-Soviet actors envision society and pursue interests at once moral, social, and economic» stated by J. Patino [1, p. 2]. To give a gift means to give a «sign of attention» (знак внимания). If an individual

expects something nice in exchange then the individual must give a gift. For example, an interviewee, Lidia, tells Patico the following: «If you have a good hairdresser, she will do better for you by blat [connections] – not just like that (ne prosto tak)» says J. Patico [5, p. 351]. Generally, an individual prefers to have money, but this carries a negative implication so receiving a gift is a way for individuals to obtain an item because during «the age of deficits one had to do with this in order to accomplish anything», stated by J. Patico [1, p. 354]. It is important to remember that a gift is a symbol that represents the type of relationship between the giver and the receiver. Although gifts are technically optional, the process of conducting such an exchange should always be carefully considered and well thought-out. Gifts are intended to praise and reward one's work and imply that the receiver is being recognized for his investment and dedication to their work-duties.

Gift-giving is a universally shared practice. For example, William Germano's Chronicle of Higher Education article, Getting Over Gift-giving, explains that gift-giving is everywhere [7] and refers to the reliable Oxford English Dictionary to support his argument that there are centuries of definitions and examples of gift-giving in the English language. Germano's discussion refutes Kramer's misunderstanding of gift-giving by explaining that there are solid historical grounds for the use of the word, gift, as a verb. To gift means to endow or furnish with gifts, and has since the 16th century. Furthermore, to gift has also meant to invest with charm, to impart a fascination to which implies that gift-exchanging requires pure intentions and care within the relationship between the giver and the receiver.

Universally, the art of gift-giving is explained

in Marcel Mauss' book, The Gift [8], as the centerpiece of even the simplest societies. Anthropologist Mary Douglas identifies Mauss' research in the forward of The Gift as an important piece of literature that explains how a gift is intended to enhance solidarity and if it does not accomplish this aim it is a contradiction [9]. Simply put, to gift is to strengthen connections in a world that has turned a dark corner and needs hope. The world could take a lesson or two from Russia's practice of gift-giving.

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С ЛЮБОВЬЮ ИЗ РОССИИ: ИСКУССТВО ДАРЕНИЯ

Аннотация.

Дарить подарок в рамках западной культуры - это неожиданное при создании новых связей и сетей. Существует разрыв между созданием новых друзей и обменом подарками. В западных культурах дарение часто неверно истолковывается как взятка или агрессивный толчок к получению желаемой выгоды. В России и других бывших советских республиках дарение - это укоренившаяся практика, которая устанавливает и укрепляет отношения. В этой статье объясняется происхождение и цель дарения, а применяемый метод для лучшего понимания роли дарения подарков заимствован из полевого подхода и оправдан работой Дженнифер Патико (2002). После раздела метода обсуждаются подходящие подарки для особых случаев и заканчивается вывод, который способствует тому, чтобы процесс вручения подарков считался символом усиления солидарности.

Ключевые слова: Дарение, культурные традиции, советские обычаи, русская культура, общение.

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РЕСЕЙЛІК МАХАББАТПЕН: «СЫЙЛЫҚ» ӨНЕР РЕТІНДЕ

Аңдатпа.

Батыс мәдениетінің аясында жаңа байланыстар мен желілерді құру кезінде сыйлық беру - бұл күтпеген оқыс жайт болып саналады. Жаңа достар табу мен сыйлықтар алмасудың арасындағы алшақтық бар. Батыс мәдениеттерінде қайырымдылық көбінесе пара немесе пайдасын қол жеткізу үшін жасалған агрессивті қадам ретінде түсініледі. Ресейде және басқа да бұрынғы кеңестік республикаларда сыйлық беру – қалыптасқан қарым-қатынастарды орнатуға және нығайтуға бағытталған ұзақ мерзімді тәжірибе. Бұл мақалада сыйлық берудің шығу тарихы мен мақсаты түсіндіріледі және сыйлық беру

рөлін жақсы түсіну үшін қолданылатын әдіс өрістік көзқараспен және Дженнифер Патиго (2002) жұмысының негіздемесі болып табылады. Әдістемелік бөлімнен кейін арнайы оқиғаларға арналған тиісті сыйлықтардың мәні талқыланып, қорытынды шығарылады, бұл сыйлықтарды тарту үрдісіне жоғары ынтымақтастықтың символы ретіндетану ұсынылады.

Түйінді сөздер: сыйлық беру, мәдени дәстүрлер, кеңестік әдет-ғұрыптар, орыс мәдениеті, желілер.

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