

Talking About: Christmas in the Kalahari—The Importance of Language in Exchange

Due to the symbolic nature of social life, the language a person uses in economic exchanges may be one of the most important aspects of that exchange. Consider the experiences of Richard Lee (1969), an anthropologist who lived many years with the Ju/'hoansi of the Kalahari Desert. He explains that he learned a very important lesson about speech when he decided to celebrate Christmas in the field by purchasing and slaughtering the fattest ox he could find in order to throw an enormous feast for the Ju/'hoansi camp.

When camp members hear that he chose a large ox from the herding camp nearby, they begin to tease him, calling the ox small, thin, and “a bag of bones.” He is certain that the ox he chose was massive, even by Ju/'hoansi standards, and says so defensively: “It’s the biggest ox.... ‘Look, you guys,’ I retorted, ‘that is a beautiful animal and I’m sure you will eat it with pleasure at Christmas’” (2). After he vehemently defends his choice, the camp members disparage him further, heap insults on the ox, and argue that people will go to bed hungry and sad. For a person used to North American Christmas in which acts of generosity are welcomed, Lee is positively flummoxed.

On the day of the feast, the butchers cut into the ox, and it is meaty with layers of delicious fat. It will feed the entire camp for several days. The camp members fall over laughing. Finally, Lee finds some people to interrogate: Why did they go to such lengths to make him feel stupid over the choice of this ox? “Arrogance,” they answer. It was the confident way in which Lee spoke about the great gift he was bestowing upon them that caused the camp members to denigrate the ox so harshly. They were trying to keep his ego in check.

Ultimately, Lee realizes that limiting people’s egos is the most adaptive strategy these foragers have for living in the harsh desert environment. They must stay united as a group in order to cooperate and share for survival. The fact that Lee was attempting to reciprocate, by providing a gift to thank them for their tolerance of him as an ethnographer, was less important than the way in which he talked about the gift. In fact, it was his bragging that brought on the camp members’ responses. If he had only known to present the ox as a “bag of bones,” he might have avoided the entire humiliating issue.