

The evergreen evolution: Balancing change and core values to keep traditions alive

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“The Crows, however, find this Crow 2.0 to be a scammer, for he looks nothing like Crow but still claims to be in the family. They all gather to chase him away. It takes several beatings for the Crow family to believe this is indeed a family relative.”

—In “Contentment”; *Wild Wise Weird* (2024)

[SCIENCE COMMUNICATION]

Gymnosperms, like pines, spruces, and firs, are a testament to nature’s ability to survive and adapt over time. Recent research has uncovered three ancient whole-genome duplications (WGDs) in gymnosperms—one in the Pinaceae family, another in cupressophytes, and a third in the unique *Welwitschia mirabilis* of the Gnetales group. These WGDs serve as a kind of genetic backup system, helping these plants grow, adapt, and thrive for millions of years. Trees like spruces and firs, often chosen as Christmas trees, don’t just represent holiday traditions—they stand for resilience and longevity [1].

Interestingly, Christmas traditions share a similar story of adaptability and endurance. Just as gymnosperms rely on genetic tools to survive, traditions depend on cultural memory to balance preservation with change. Christmas traditions endure because they blend timeless symbols—like trees, lights, and carols—with universal values such as family, kindness, and generosity [2].



Illustration. Source: <https://www.imagine.art>

Though Christmas started as a religious celebration, it has evolved to embrace broader themes of joy, giving, and togetherness, making it meaningful to people of diverse backgrounds and beliefs [3]. Over time, these traditions have mixed global influences with local customs through a process known as “glocalization,” where global ideas are adapted to fit local cultures [4].

The mindsponge theory explains how traditions, like Christmas, evolve by absorbing new elements while preserving their core values. This adaptability helps traditions stay relevant in changing times [5]. Globalization has accelerated this process, spreading traditions worldwide. However, for these global influences to take root, they often need to be reshaped to fit local contexts.

For example, the Christmas tree—a universal symbol of warmth, family, and unity—varies in appearance and decoration across cultures. Similarly, Santa Claus has been adapted in distinct ways. In Hungary and Eastern Europe, Santa Claus and Krampus—a folkloric character known for punishing misbehaving children—have remained central to holiday

celebrations, even surviving attempts by communist regimes to suppress cultural and religious practices [4]. In Greek tradition, St. Basileios (St. Basil) can be seen as a localized version of Santa Claus. This adaptation blends ancient religious customs with modern influences, creating a figure that resonates with both traditional values and contemporary holiday themes [6].

While some traditional religious Christmas rituals have become less common in more secular societies, families often incorporate customs from other cultures to make their celebrations special. These changes reflect personal beliefs and identities while still focusing on the main themes of family, giving, and happiness [7,8]. This ability to adapt is why Christmas traditions remain strong, even in a rapidly changing world. Traditions like gift-giving, Santa Claus, and the Christmas tree show how we keep what is most important while adapting other aspects to fit our lives.

In the end, culture is both a stabilizer and a force for change. Traditions evolve with society, influenced by personal experiences, family practices, and cultural exchanges. Mindsponge theory reminds us that the key to preserving traditions is finding a balance—welcoming change while staying true to the values that make them meaningful [5,9,10].

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