

# Celebrating the Corporate Plunder of Agriculture

Deck the Halls with Boughs of Holly?

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*While Christmas celebrates the birth of Jesus Christ on 25 December, that date was probably originally chosen due to the winter solstice on the ancient Roman calendar or because of one of the various other ancient seasonal festivals and celebrations around that time.*

Aside from the date, early Christianity also annexed many traditions (see [this](#) and [this](#)). Places where pagan gods proclaimed revelations [became shrines and temples became churches](#). Ancient superstitions were played on and used to good effect. In some European countries, old myths and festivals were modified and passed off as Christian, and [gods and heroes were incorporated](#) into the pantheon of Christian saints.

Today, Christmas combines evergreen decorations and feasting from pagan times. For instance, the origins of the [Christmas tree, Yule log and wreaths](#) can all be traced back to pagan beliefs and practices that were rooted in rural communities. And while non-believers may have no problem with joining in certain aspects of the Christmas festivities, many others might welcome the advice of British author Simon Singh who encourages people to spend Christmas tuning their radios to hear echoes of the big bang. Why not? After all, Christmas is a time for rejoicing in the wonder of birth and creation.

## Rural deities and agriculture

Many of the ancient rituals and celebrations that Christianity incorporated helped humans come to terms with some of the most basic issues of existence (death, fertility, good, evil, love, hate, etc.) and also served to sanctify their practical relationship with the natural environment and its role in sustaining human life. The planting and harvesting of crops and various other seasonal activities associated with food production thus became central to various beliefs and customs. For example, Freyfaxi marks the beginning of the harvest in [Norse paganism](#), while [Lammas](#) or [Lughnasadh](#) is the celebration of the first harvest/grain harvest in [Paganism](#) and [Wicca](#) and by the ancient Celts.

Humans celebrated nature and the life it gave birth to, even if they did so by using concepts, practices and belief systems that would appear alien by today's standards. Ancient beliefs and rituals were imbued with hope and renewal, and people had a necessary and immediate relationship the sun, seeds, animals wind, soil and rain and the changing seasons that nourished and brought life.

Discussing Britain, [Robert W Nicholls explains](#):

The cults of Woden and Thor were superimposed on far older and better-rooted beliefs related to the sun and the earth, the crops and the animals, and the

rotation of the seasons between the light and warmth of summer and the cold and dark of winter. These ancient beliefs were so well established that whatever the name of the great god who for the moment was favored by the state rulers, whether Mithras or Woden - or Christ - the old practices, so essential for the fertility of the crops and for good luck in life, were maintained in farming communities until Christian decrees and the feudal system led to their final attrition.

Nicholls reaffirms the importance of agriculture in these beliefs by adding:

Little is known about the religious beliefs that sustained the rural population of pre-Christian Britain... The range of pagan deities - earth, water, fire, the sun, stone, and wood - supported as they were by agrarian production, suggests a religion that had a sound practical base. Two illusive figures appear as a backdrop to rural beliefs and demonstrate a male-female, winter-summer bipolarity: an ancient Earth Mother, who preceded the rise of later goddesses and grain deities, and a horned god of the hunt, who was the pivotal focus of a totem cult of stag masqueraders.

### Uprooting indigenous agriculture

We need look no further than [India](#) to appreciate the important relationship between culture agriculture and natural world, not least the vital importance of the monsoon and seasonal planting and harvesting. Rural-based beliefs and rituals steeped in nature persist, even among urban Indians. These are bound to traditional knowledge systems where livelihoods, the seasons, food, cooking, nutrition, seed exchange, healthcare and the passing on of knowledge are all inter-related and form the foundations of culture and the essence cultural diversity within India itself. In [this link](#), Vandana Shiva describes the role that mustard plays in all of this.

Similar knowledge systems and customs have been lost in the West. They are also under direct threat in India as foreign corporations seek to capture and hollow out the system of food production from seed to plate. What will then become of India's food and food production system or its traditional social structures, knowledge and cultures, its biodiversity and its independence? Indeed, genetically modified (GM) mustard could be the first food crop to be commercialised in India.

Vandana Shiva notes the implications:

The traditional knowledge of women and the biodiversity that protects the earth are threatened by the monocultures, intensive chemical input and large processing factories that come with GM Mustard. Women's caretaking of the seed, food and sacredness of mustard is stripped away, while local oil mills are shut down and corporations take over the value chain from seed-to-oil.

Although the roots of Christmas lie in the commemoration of ancient rural ways which centred on humanity's relationship with the natural environment, it has pretty much become a festival for an urban, media-manipulated population for whom the original customs and beliefs have been lost.

The ultimate irony (and hypocrisy) it that Christmas is now cheer-led and celebrated by a

consumer capitalism whose corporations are destroying the environment through, for example, the genetic engineering of crops, the drenching of soil with agrotoxins, the eradication of indigenous cultures and agriculture and the privatisation of land, seeds and water. And they are doing this by 'playing god'.

The 'hand of god'

In the 1950s, Union Carbide produced a [series of images](#) that depicted the company as a 'hand of god' coming out of the sky to 'solve' some of the issues facing humanity. One of the most famous images is of the hand [pouring agrochemicals](#) on Indian soils. As Christianity co-opted traditional pagan beliefs to achieve hegemony, corporations have also sought to depict themselves in a god-like, all-knowing fashion.

But instead of using spiritual/religious ideology to secure compliance, they have relied on neoliberal economic dogma and have co-opted science and scientists whose appeals to authority (not logic) have turned them into the [high priests of modern society](#).

That's not to say that corporations have not been averse to playing on and manipulating ancient (spiritual/religious-based) beliefs and cultures to secure allegiance. In the book '[Food and Cultural Studies](#)' (Bob Ashley et al), we see how, some years ago, a Coca Cola TV ad campaign sold its product to an audience which associated modernity with a sugary drink and depicted ancient Aboriginal beliefs as harmful, ignorant and outdated. Coke and not rain became the giver of life to the parched. This type of ideology forms part of a wider strategy to discredit traditional cultures and portray them as being deficient in need of assistance from 'hand of god' corporations.

Whether it is [fuelled by Bill Gates](#), the World Bank's [neoliberal-based rhetoric](#) about 'enabling the business of agriculture' or The World Economic Forum's '[Grow](#)' strategy, in terms of agriculture, the implication is that the world's farmers must be 'helped' out of their awful 'backwardness' by the West and its powerful corporations - all facilitated of course by a globalised, corrupt system of capitalism.

And what is the result?

We see the [capturing of markets and global supply chains](#) for the benefit of transnational corporations involved in food production. We see the destruction of natural habitat in Indonesia to produce palm oil. We see the use of [cynical lies](#) (linked to palm oil production) to corrupt India's food system with genetically modified seeds. We witness the [devastating impact on farmers](#) and [rural communities](#). We see [the degradation](#) of soils, health and water resources.

And, in places like India, we also see the transnational corporate commercialisation and [displacement of localised productive systems](#): systems centred on [smallholder/family farms that are](#) more productive and sustainable, produce a healthier and more diverse diet, are better for securing local and regional food security and are the life-blood of communities.

No doubt corporate boardrooms will echo with seasonal greetings over the coming week. The same boardrooms (populated by [multi-millionaires](#) whose salaries are boosted by the sales of [environmentally destructive products](#)) that will be adorned with the evergreen decorations from ancient times that were once used to pay homage to nature.

The same boardrooms where plans for the ongoing destruction of livelihoods and the natural environment goes hand in hand with ([taxpayer-subsidised](#)) profit and arrogance.

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