

# Coordinating Wonder: The Structural Reinvention of Magical Giving Systems

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## Abstract

*Magical giving systems constitute a vast, decentralised, and culturally embedded social institution centred on the annual distribution of symbolic gifts, reassurance, and belonging for children. Despite their emotional significance and ritual continuity, these systems lack shared coordination, formal governance structures, and sustainable operational mechanisms. Drawing on qualitative interviews and focus groups with key actors across traditions, this paper examines the systemic pressures affecting magical giving, including logistical strain, demographic change, and ecological vulnerability. Using an abductive analytical approach grounded in the Gioia methodology, we identify four aggregate dimensions that characterise the system's current condition: emotional mandate, logistical fragmentation, symbolic legitimacy, and a latent aspiration for coordinated reinvention. We integrate these findings with relevant organisational and sociological theory to articulate structural design requirements and propose three alternative governance architectures for system reform. We then outline a multidimensional evaluation framework to assess potential impacts on operational resilience, cultural continuity, and emotional effectiveness. The paper concludes by arguing that safeguarding symbolic continuity will require structural adaptation capable of reinforcing, rather than replacing, ritual meaning.*

**Keywords:** Symbolic institutions, Ritual governance, Magical giving systems, Polycentric coordination, Institutional resilience, Nonprofit systems, Myth and management

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## 1. Introduction

Across a wide range of cultural contexts, mid-winter traditions feature mythic figures who bring gifts, reassurance, and symbolic recognition to children. Although broadly understood as imaginative or legendary, these figures collectively constitute a remarkably enduring social practice: a diffuse, transnational infrastructure of emotional care anchored in ritual meaning. Their functions extend beyond material exchange, shaping seasonal anticipation, emotional security, and intergenerational belonging. Yet despite their scope and impact, magical giving systems have evolved organically rather than institutionally, without shared coordination mechanisms, policy design, or formalised governance structures.

Recent global developments amplify the urgency of examining such systems. The abrupt discontinuation of USAID programming in 2025 exposed the fragility of international support architectures, demonstrating how systemic discontinuity can destabilise populations reliant on ritualised forms of social reassurance. While structurally distinct, magical giving systems face analogous challenges: highly uneven capacity, fragmented logistical practices, concentration of operational burdens, and increasing expectations

from recipients. These pressures raise questions about the long-term sustainability of a tradition whose social legitimacy remains strong, yet whose structural foundations are increasingly precarious.

This paper therefore asks how magical giving systems might evolve organisationally in order to preserve symbolic continuity while strengthening operational resilience. Using an inductive qualitative design, we analyse interviews and focus groups with key figures, helpers, beneficiaries, and symbolic objects. We then integrate the emergent findings with organisational theory, institutional sociology, and governance scholarship to articulate design requirements for system transformation. Finally, we develop and assess three alternative governance models aimed at coordinating wonder without diminishing its meaning.

## **2. Empirical Context: The Existing Magical Giving System**

Magical giving systems constitute a globally dispersed symbolic infrastructure oriented towards the annual emotional reassurance and recognition of children during the winter season. They are deeply rooted in mythic, religious, folkloric, and ancestral traditions which, over generations, have accumulated institutional functions without ever formalising organisational structure. Although frequently interpreted as fictional or legendary, these systems operate as meaningful social institutions that modulate expectations, organise seasonal anticipation, and reinforce intergenerational belonging. Their cyclical reappearance marks temporal thresholds, creates shared emotional rhythms, and produces collective symbolic continuity.

Distinct traditions have developed across cultural regions, each defined by emblematic figures who function as ritual authorities and custodians of wonder. Their legitimacy derives from narrative tradition, emotional resonance, and collective belief rather than from legal or bureaucratic sanction. Production practices are imagined as distributed across workshops, helpers, craft guilds, and sometimes industrialised facilities. Timing is tightly coupled to solstice cycles, religious holidays, and entrenched seasonal cultural repertoires. Although the outputs take material form, their primary function is symbolic: the purpose of these systems is to convey recognition, nurture imagination, deliver reassurance, and sustain a shared belief in communal generosity.

### **2.1 Narrative System Description**

In practice, magical giving systems operate without formal coordination mechanisms, funding structures, or centralised decision-making. Operational arrangements differ markedly across traditions: Santa Claus is portrayed as coordinating a large-scale, centralised supply chain, whereas the Christkind model relies on domestic ritual enactment mediated by family caretakers, and the Three Kings draw on a multi-centred territorial framework culminating in Epiphany. In some regions, systems incorporate auxiliary agents—reindeer, angels, workshop hands—while in others the authority figure acts alone, supported primarily by household enactments and parental intermediaries.

This diversity reflects culturally specific expressions of seasonal care rather than coherent organisational design. Yet beneath these differences lie common systemic logics: emotional impact supersedes logistical efficiency, symbolic continuity outweighs distributional optimisation, and legitimacy is culturally

reproduced rather than procedurally validated. These systems fulfil social functions normally associated with institutional welfare—except that, in this case, the “institution” is mythic rather than administrative.

## 2.2 Abstract System Characteristics and Emerging Strain

When conceptualised analytically, magical giving appears as a multi-sited, decentralised, symbolic service system composed of autonomous actors operating in parallel without shared standards or common infrastructure. Production is fragmented and capacity is unevenly distributed across regions. Symbolic authority replaces bureaucratic governance, while cultural legitimacy substitutes for institutional accountability. As a result, core functional features—production, delivery, coverage, quality, and ecological footprint—vary widely between traditions.

This fragmentation generates systemic consequences. Because no overarching coordination exists, duplication of effort is common, symbolic reach is uneven, material strain accumulates unevenly, and operational vulnerabilities proliferate across seasons. Respondents described increasing pressure linked to demographic expansion, volatile climatic conditions, rising sustainability expectations, and decreasing time margins for preparation. As global interdependencies deepen, the resilience of the present arrangement appears tenuous. Without structural adaptation, the continuity of magical giving risks becoming uncertain—particularly for children in regions where capacity is weakest.

To illustrate the current landscape and its heterogeneity, Table 1 presents the principal magical figures, their core cultural domains, and the estimated number of children symbolically reached across each regional sphere.

| RANK | FIGURE                          | REGION / CULTURAL SPHERE  | HUMAN COMPANIONS                     | ANIMAL COMPANIONS               | ESTIMATED CHILD POPULATION IN CULTURAL SPHERE*         |
|------|---------------------------------|---|--------------------------------------|---------------------------------|--|
| 1    | Santa Claus                     | USA, Canada, United Kingdom, Ireland, Western Europe + global influence | Mrs Claus, elves                     | Reindeer                        | ≈ 150–200 million                                      |
| 2    | Ded Moroz (“Grandfather Frost”) | Russia & post-Soviet region   | Snegurochka                          | Horse-drawn troika              | ≈ 40–50 million  |
| 3    | Sinterklaas                     | Netherlands, Belgium, parts of Northern Germany                         | Pieten (modern diversified versions) | Horse (white stallion)          | ≈ 7–10 million   |
| 4    | Ayaz Ata (Asia)                 | Central Asia (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Azerbaijan, etc.)                 | Qar Qızı (“Snow Maiden”)             | –                               | ≈ 8–12 million   |
| 5    | Christkind                      | Southern & Western Germany, Austria, Switzerland, Central Europe        | – (angelic figure alone)             | –                               | ≈ 7–9 million  |
| 6    | Joulupukki (Scandinavia)        | Primarily Finland; influence in Sweden/Norway                           | –                                    | Reindeer (non-flying)           | ≈ 4–5 million  |
| 7    | Julenisse / Jultomte            | Norway / Sweden / Denmark   | – (sometimes human impersonation)    | Goat (historically the Julbock) | ≈ 4–6 million  |
| 8    | La Befana                       | Italy   | –                                    | –                               | ≈ 4–5 million  |
| 9    | Reyes Magos (Three Wise Kings)  | Spain, Mexico, Caribbean, parts of Latin America                        | –                                    | Camels                          | ≈ 30–45 million ( <b>actually belongs at Rank 2!</b> ) |
| 10   | Jólasveinar — “13 Yule Lads”    | Iceland   | Grýla (mythological mother)          | –                               | ≈ 0.1 million  |

Table 1: magical figures bringing gifts

### 3. Methods

This study adopts an inductive qualitative research design to investigate how magical giving systems understand themselves, how they organise production and delivery, and how their actors perceive structural constraints and future vulnerabilities. Given the absence of formal documentation, institutional reporting standards, or quantitative indicators, qualitative inquiry was the most appropriate approach for capturing the tacit knowledge, cultural logic, and symbolic self-understanding that characterise these systems (Charmaz, 2014; Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). The methodological aim was not to verify pre-existing

theoretical assumptions, but rather to generate a conceptually grounded interpretation of how magical giving functions as a complex, transnational social institution.

A qualitative design also allowed us to encompass different actor positions within the system, including leadership figures, production workers, logistical assistants, and recipients. Such heterogeneity is central to interpretive research because meaning is relational rather than categorical; institutional logics can only be understood through the interactions between roles, expectations, and practices (Gioia, Corley, & Hamilton, 2013). Accordingly, this research focuses on the lived experience, cultural self-description, and organisational sense-making expressed by participants.

### **3.1 Qualitative Research Design**

The empirical material consists of long-form semi-structured interviews and multi-actor focus groups. In total, fourteen expert interviews were conducted with individuals occupying central positions within magical giving systems. These were complemented by three multi-actor focus groups, three narrative interviews with children aged 6, 10 and 15, and two interpretive interviews with symbolic objects intended to represent experiential and material endpoints of the system. Interview durations ranged between 17 and 44 minutes, while focus groups lasted between 61 and 78 minutes. All material was recorded, transcribed, and subjected to systematic analysis.

The purpose of the qualitative inquiry was to explore the internal logic and implicit expectations that underpin magical giving. In particular, we sought to understand how participants perceive the system's objectives, where they experience strain, what challenges they anticipate, and which forms of coordination they consider desirable. The empirical focus is therefore interpretive and exploratory rather than confirmatory.

### **3.2 Sampling Strategy**

Sampling was purposive and aimed at capturing the widest possible variation of roles, geographies, and symbolic responsibilities. Rather than aiming for representativeness, we sought structural contrast (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), enabling us to identify differences and complementarities across the system.

Participants included dominant seasonal figures with global reach (such as Santa Claus), regional actors with deep cultural embedding (such as Ded Moroz and the Christkind), artisans and workshop-based producers, logistical assistants such as reindeer and magical transport specialists, and children representing ritual beneficiaries. Symbolic objects were included to broaden the interpretive lens and to reflect the material embodiment of system outputs.

This heterogeneous sampling approach ensured access to a wide spectrum of perspectives across the system's symbolic, organisational, and experiential dimensions.

### **3.3 Data Collection and Production**

Interviews were conducted individually, either in person or through magical remote channels. Focus groups brought together actors who operate jointly in practice but rarely engage in structured reflection. The inclusion of multi-actor conversations enabled insight into interactional meaning-making processes and collective framings of systemic challenges.

All material was transcribed in full and prepared for coding. Field notes were produced following each session to capture contextual observations and researcher impressions.

### **3.4 Analytical Approach**

Analysis followed an abductive and iterative trajectory. Initial reading of the transcripts proceeded through open coding in order to document expressed concerns, operational descriptions, and implicit assumptions. Emerging codes were then clustered into categories reflecting recurring patterns across interviews. These patterns were interpreted in relation to structural and institutional characteristics of the system, resulting in a synthesis of core themes and systemic tensions.

The coding and aggregation process was guided by principles articulated in the Gioia methodology, which supports the construction of data structures that preserve participant voice while enabling conceptual abstraction (Gioia et al., 2013). Following this approach, first-order codes were retained in language close to participants, while second-order themes and aggregate dimensions were developed through interpretive comparison and theoretical integration.

### **3.5 Limitations**

This study confronts several limitations inherent to the object of inquiry. Magical giving systems lack formal institutional boundaries, documented procedures, standardised role descriptions, or quantifiable output indicators. As a result, the findings reconstruct the system from the standpoint of participant perception rather than organisational documentation. This does not constitute a methodological flaw, but rather reflects the symbolic and cultural nature of the phenomenon under study. Nevertheless, findings must be interpreted with awareness that they represent articulated experience rather than administrative record.

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## **4. Data Structure (Gioia Framework)**

This chapter presents the inductively developed data structure that emerged from the qualitative analysis. In line with the Gioia methodology (Gioia, Corley, & Hamilton, 2013), the analytical process proceeded through successive layers of abstraction: first capturing participant expressions in their own terms, then aggregating these into second-order themes, and finally consolidating these into higher-order conceptual dimensions. The aim of this procedure was to preserve the emic voice of participants while constructing a coherent analytical architecture capable of supporting interpretation at a systemic level.

Following transcription and initial familiarisation, interviews and focus groups were coded line-by-line using open coding techniques. Recurring concerns, hopes, stressors, expectations, descriptions, and judgements expressed by participants were retained in first-order form. These codes were subsequently condensed into second-order conceptual themes through iterative comparison and synthesis. In a third step, the second-order themes were integrated into aggregate dimensions reflecting structural tensions and institutional properties evident across the entire data corpus. The resulting structure constitutes an analytical map of the meanings expressed by system actors.

The data structure presented below demonstrates how individual articulations converge into shared patterns and, ultimately, into system-level dimensions.

| FIRST-ORDER CATEGORIES (PARTICIPANT EXPRESSIONS)              | SECOND-ORDER THEMES (INTERPRETIVE CONCEPTS) | AGGREGATE DIMENSIONS                            |
|---|---|---|
| “Children must feel seen and remembered”                      | Emotional maintenance and reassurance       | Emotional mandate & symbolic purpose            |
| “Our task is to keep the magic alive”                         | Symbolic continuity                         | Emotional mandate & symbolic purpose            |
| “There is never enough time before the big night”             | Seasonal production compression             | Production strain & logistical fragmentation    |
| “We are always rushing to make everything ready”              | Capacity pressure                           | Production strain & logistical fragmentation    |
| “Everyone works alone” / “No one knows what others are doing” | Gaps in systemic coordination               | Production strain & logistical fragmentation    |
| “Families trust the story more than anything”                 | Cultural legitimacy                         | Legitimacy structures & symbolic vulnerability  |
| “Tradition cannot be changed carelessly”                      | Ritual anchoring                            | Legitimacy structures & symbolic vulnerability  |
| “Climate and supply disruptions are getting worse”            | Environmental & resource vulnerability      | Legitimacy structures & symbolic vulnerability  |
| “We need shared knowledge and support”                        | Desire for collaborative planning           | Emergent aspiration for coordinated reinvention |
| “Someone should help us prepare better”                       | Structural support expectation              | Emergent aspiration for coordinated reinvention |

Table 2: Gioia-Style Data Structure Derived From Qualitative Analysis

Taken together, this structure documents how individual and local experiences scale into recognisable systemic dynamics. The four aggregate dimensions — emotional mandate and symbolic purpose;

production strain and logistical fragmentation; legitimacy structures and symbolic vulnerability; and a latent aspiration for coordinated reinvention — constitute the analytical foundation of the subsequent findings chapter. They provide conceptual orientation for the reader, clarify the logic behind the organisation of results, and prepare the transition toward the formal presentation of qualitative findings.

In the following chapter, we develop each dimension through detailed narrative analysis, drawing on multiple perspectives within the system.

## **5. Integrated Findings and Interpretive Analysis**

The qualitative material demonstrates that magical giving systems operate in a paradoxical zone between enchantment and organisation. They are emotionally indispensable and symbolically authoritative, yet structurally fragile and increasingly strained. In this chapter, the four aggregate dimensions derived from the data structure are interpreted in relation to the theoretical frameworks of Mauss, Bourdieu, Weber, Ostrom, Foucault and others. This analytical integration allows a deeper understanding of the forces shaping the system and clarifies the structural imperatives implied by the findings.

### **5.1 Emotional Mandate and Symbolic Purpose**

Participants across traditions consistently emphasised that magical giving exists to generate emotional reassurance and to reaffirm children's belonging. Gifts are framed not as objects, but as symbolic gestures affirming the child's place within the moral community. This reflects Mauss' (1925/2016) classical view of the gift as a "total social fact," in which emotional, moral and communal dimensions are inseparable from material ones. Interviewees described their mission in terms of wonder and recognition, which aligns closely with Collins' (2004) argument that ritual performance produces emotional energy that sustains collective identity beyond the ritual moment.

From a Bourdieusian perspective, magical giving can be interpreted as a mechanism through which symbolic capital is socially accumulated, transferred and reproduced across generations (Bourdieu, 1986). The gift, in this sense, constitutes an investment in the symbolic future of the child by positioning them within a shared cultural field. Its force lies not in acquisition but in belonging. Structurally, this means that emotional yield is the core output of the system. In Weberian terms, this represents a domain of meaning in which substantive rationality dominates instrumental rationality (Weber, 1922/1978). Any reform that privileges procedural efficiency over symbolic efficacy would therefore strike at the heart of the system's legitimacy.

### **5.2 Production Strain and Logistical Fragmentation**

Production actors described increasing strain associated with seasonal compression, resource scarcity, and uneven capacity. While these challenges were expressed affectively, their consistency across contexts indicates systemic forces at work. Ostrom (2010) argues that polycentric systems experience strain when coordination demands exceed the absorptive capacity of autonomous units. Magical giving systems appear to have reached precisely this point. This dynamic is mirrored in Provan and Kenis' (2008) network



governance model, which predicts structural overload in decentralised systems operating without binding coordination mechanisms.

Weber's observations on rationalisation are particularly illuminating in this context. He noted that modern institutions tend toward bureaucratic ordering as scale and complexity increase (Weber, 1917/1948). The interviews document exactly such pressures, albeit in muted and symbolic form. Participants describe rising expectations, rising demand and diminishing margins for improvisation – all emblematic of what Weber termed “the creeping iron cage” (Weber, 1917/1948). What is fascinating in this context is the collision between enchantment and administration: a system constituted as enchantment is now facing pressures toward formal coordination, planning and proceduralisation.

Thus, production strain is not merely emotional exhaustion; it is a structural response to a rationalisation trajectory unfolding beneath the symbolic surface.

### **5.3 Legitimacy, Ritual Continuity, and Structural Vulnerability**

Respondents consistently described the legitimacy of magical giving as rooted in narrative tradition rather than in written mandate. Meyer and Rowan's (1977) account of institutional legitimacy provides a useful framework here: legitimacy is generated through cultural alignment, not procedural correctness. Bourdieu reinforces this interpretation by emphasising that symbolic authority is sustained through recognition and misrecognition (Bourdieu, 1991). Magical figures hold authority precisely because their authority is accepted as self-evident.

Yet this symbolic foundation creates structural vulnerability. As Scott (2014) notes, deeply institutionalised arrangements resist adaptation even when environmental pressures intensify. Weber (1922/1978) describes such situations as “traditional authority” confronted with the encroachment of rationalising pressures. This corresponds precisely with the anxieties expressed by participants: the fear that structural change might erode symbolic continuity.

Foucault's concept of power-knowledge is equally relevant. The identity of magical givers – who they are, what they do, how their authority operates – is continuously stabilised discursively (Foucault, 1972/1982). Magical legitimacy is not given; it is produced through narratives, rituals and familial transmission. That discursive foundation is both powerful and fragile.

The interviews thus reveal a paradox: legitimacy is simultaneously the system's greatest strength and its primary obstacle to adaptation.

### **5.4 Latent Aspiration for Coordinated Reinvention**

Despite clear concerns regarding symbolic continuity, interviewees expressed a pronounced desire for some form of supportive coordination. They wished for shared learning, distributed standards and mutual assistance. Their sentiment aligns with Bartlett and Ghoshal's (1989/2018) model of transnational

integration, which describes systems in which local autonomy is preserved while a shared backbone enables cohesion.

Weber's theory of legitimacy transformation suggests that institutional orders change when traditional authority reaches the limits of self-maintenance and begins to require new forms of procedural scaffolding (Weber, 1922/1978). What the interviewees express may represent the pre-institutional phase of such a shift: an emerging recognition that enchantment alone cannot sustain the system's operational needs.

From a Foucauldian perspective, this aspiration marks a shift in discourse formation: a movement from silent acceptance to reflective visibility. The actors begin speaking *about* the system – and thus begin constructing alternative meanings for it.

This readiness is analytically critical:  
not because coordination exists,  
but because the desire for coordination exists.

### 5.5 Synthesis and the Emerging Structural Imperative

Taken together, the findings show that magical giving systems operate on a symbolic plane grounded in ritual, recognition and emotional reassurance, while simultaneously confronting Weberian rationalisation pressures and structural fragmentation. Their legitimacy is discursively produced and ritually reproduced, yet their operational stresses accumulate materially and seasonally. Bourdieu helps us see how symbolic capital binds children into the field; Weber helps identify rationalisation pressures; Foucault illuminates the discursive construction of legitimacy.

These findings therefore establish not only descriptive insight, but structural necessity.

To preserve symbolic purpose in the future,  
magical giving must evolve institutional form.

Not despite enchantment,  
but precisely because enchantment must survive.

The next chapter defines the structural principles required for such reinvention.

## 6. Structural Design Requirements Emerging From the Findings

The empirical analysis revealed that magical giving systems combine profound symbolic authority with increasingly fragile organisational foundations. The ritual legitimacy of these systems remains strong, yet they face expanding coordination burdens, environmental volatility, and rising expectations. To remain effective under contemporary conditions, magical giving must undergo a cautious structural transformation. Importantly, this transformation must protect symbolic continuity while enabling more resilient forms of coordination and support. The following sections outline the core design requirements that emerge from the intersection of empirical findings and theoretical interpretation.

## 6.1 Preserving Cultural Integrity While Building Structural Capacity

The first requirement concerns the preservation of cultural meaning during organisational redesign. Participants in the study emphasised repeatedly that magical giving derives its authority from emotional reassurance and narrative continuity. This aligns with Mauss' (1925/2016) and Komter's (2005) interpretations of gifting as a symbolic institution that produces and reproduces belonging. As Weber (1922/1978) notes, traditional authority derives its stability from cultural recognition, not procedural regulation. Any structural innovation must therefore safeguard symbolic reproduction as the system's central function.

From the perspective of organisational change, this point cannot be overstated. Peter F. Drucker famously observed that “culture eats strategy for breakfast” (Drucker, 1974). Scholarly evidence confirms this insight: research demonstrates that between 60% and 75% of mergers and acquisitions fail primarily due to cultural incompatibility rather than technical or financial misalignment (Christensen et al., 2011; Marks & Mirvis, 2011). This finding has direct relevance here. Magical giving operates in a domain where symbolic identity is not secondary but foundational. As a result, the tolerance for cultural disruption is even lower than in corporate integration processes.

The main implication is clear: organisational redesign cannot impose a strategic architecture onto cultural meaning. Rather, structural evolution must arise from and reinforce cultural identity. Reform will only be viable if children, families, and mythic figures perceive it as an extension of tradition, not as its substitution. In this sense, the emotional mandate discussed earlier is not simply an analytical observation; it defines the primary boundary condition for transformation.

## 6.2 Redistributing Coordination Burdens Without Bureaucratisation

The second structural requirement concerns coordination capacity. The findings indicate that the burden of planning, production, and logistics is currently borne by individual actors rather than supported by shared infrastructure. Theoretical models predict that such arrangements cannot sustain further expansion. Ostrom (2010) argues that polycentric systems function efficiently only when cooperation burdens are moderate. Similarly, Provan and Kenis (2008) state that decentralised “shared governance” networks become ineffective once scale, complexity, and uncertainty increase.

Magical giving has reached this point. The exhaustion reported by helpers, producers, and logistical assistants reflects a transition from symbolic vocation to operational overload. However, the solution cannot be bureaucratic centralisation. Weber (1917/1948) warns that the rationalising impulse inherent to bureaucratic coordination produces disenchantment: procedural logics gradually displace meaning. If magical giving were reorganised through technocratic administration alone, symbolic legitimacy would deteriorate.

The task, therefore, is to redistribute coordination burdens **without eroding enchantment**. This implies the development of a supportive backbone — shared data, common planning cycles, equitable resource

mechanisms, sustainability standards — while preserving creative local autonomy. Bartlett and Ghoshal's (1989/2018) transnational model offers a helpful conceptual direction: integration through shared infrastructures, not through hierarchical homogenisation.

### 6.3 Modernising Tradition from Within: Enabling Adaptive Continuity

The third requirement concerns the paradox of legitimacy and adaptation. As Scott (2014) notes, deeply embedded institutions tend to resist change precisely because stability is the source of their legitimacy. Yet crises emerge when symbolic continuity is preserved at the expense of structural adaptation. The findings suggest that magical giving stands at such a threshold. Participants express anxiety about change while simultaneously recognising that existing structures cannot sustain future pressures.

From Weber's perspective, this situation represents a transitional phase in which traditional authority begins to incorporate procedural safeguards to preserve itself under new conditions (Weber, 1922/1978). From Foucault's vantage point, the very fact that actors increasingly speak about the system signals a shift in the discursive field (Foucault, 1972/1982). From Bourdieu's perspective, symbolic continuity requires the accumulation not only of symbolic capital, but also of institutional capital capable of stabilising symbolic value (Bourdieu, 1986).

The design imperative here is neither radical reinvention nor rigid preservation. It is adaptive continuity. Structural change must occur **through tradition**, not against it. Reform must make tradition more resilient, not more fragile. Actors must perceive institutional adaptation not as departure, but as reinforcement. Only such a process can ensure that restructuring deepens legitimacy rather than destabilising it.

## 7. Governance Architectures for System Reinvention

The findings and structural requirements developed in the preceding chapters suggest that magical giving systems must evolve toward a more resilient institutional configuration without undermining the symbolic foundations upon which their legitimacy rests. This imperative raises the question of how such evolution can be operationalised at a structural level. Three broad governance architectures emerge as viable options: a federated coordination model, a shared-services backbone model, and a stewardship alliance model. Each model reflects a distinct balance between symbolic plurality and logistical integration, and each offers different pathways for achieving adaptive continuity. This chapter elaborates these models, highlighting how they respond to the system's emotional mandate, its fragmentation pressures, and its cultural constraints.

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### 7.1 Model I: Federated Coordination System

The first model envisions a federation of autonomous magical giving traditions under a loose coordinating umbrella. In this configuration, symbolic authority remains fully localised: Santa Claus retains Icelandic

independence, the Christkind remains tied to Central European cultural identity, Ded Moroz continues to operate within Slavic ritual spaces, and so forth. However, participating figures commit to a coordinated governance council focused on shared scheduling, sustainability standards, and mutual vulnerability monitoring.

Such a model draws inspiration from Ostrom's research on polycentric collaboration, which shows that decentralised actors can achieve considerable synergy when coordination principles are negotiated rather than imposed (Ostrom, 2010). At the same time, federated structures preserve symbolic authenticity by preventing homogenisation — a key cultural risk documented in merger research (Christensen et al., 2011). The limitation of this model lies in its reliance on voluntary cooperation and informal commitment. It is therefore strong in cultural compatibility but weaker in operational authority. It represents an evolutionary rather than transformative step.

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## 7.2 Model II: Shared-Services Backbone Organisation

The second model envisions a transnational backbone organisation providing centralised operational support while leaving narrative and cultural authority entirely intact. Under this arrangement, the magical figures and traditions remain independent in identity, meaning, practice, and ritual timing, yet they share a dedicated logistical apparatus for production planning, ecological sustainability, supply chain management, risk pooling, and emergency disruption response.

This architecture is informed by Bartlett and Ghoshal's (1989/2018) theory of transnational integration, which argues that global organisations achieve resilience not through centralised decision-making, but through distributed autonomy supported by shared infrastructure. Such an arrangement also corresponds to Bufkin's (2020) findings that shared-services models in nonprofit networks improve resilience without compromising mission identity. Importantly, this model offers greater efficiency scaling than a federation, because operational capability is built institutionally rather than negotiated interpersonally.

However, as Drucker reminds us, structural improvements that neglect cultural embeddedness are likely to fail (Drucker, 1974). A backbone organisation must therefore operate at the level of material capacity, never narrative directive. Symbolic continuity remains sacrosanct. Operational integration must be invisible to children and culturally aligned with families. If achieved correctly, this model would materially reduce strain while protecting enchantment.

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## 7.3 Model III: Stewardship Alliance With Distributed Mandate

The third model envisions a stewardship alliance designed specifically to safeguard the emotional, cultural, and ritual continuity of magical giving systems. Rather than prioritising logistical efficiency, this architecture prioritises cultural sustainability, intergenerational transmission, and symbolic resilience. In

this configuration, representatives from each tradition collaborate on shared stewardship objectives, such as narrative continuity, psychological wellbeing impact, and intergenerational engagement, while granting secondary priority to logistical optimisation.

This approach draws from Bourdieu's (1986) insight that symbolic capital must be consciously reproduced to remain authoritative, as well as from Scott's (2014) understanding that institutional continuity depends on the alignment of cultural, normative, and cognitive pillars. In this model, the alliance functions primarily as ritual guarantor, educational forum, and cultural reproduction platform. Operational consequences would follow gradually rather than immediately. Its advantage lies in safeguarding meaning; its weakness lies in its slower path toward operational transformation.

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#### 7.4 Comparative Assessment

Each of the three models embodies a different strategy for balancing cultural autonomy with structural necessity. The federated model privileges cultural stability and minimises intrusion, making it the least disruptive option. The backbone model offers the most substantial operational benefit and represents the most decisive response to the strain identified in the findings. The stewardship model secures long-term symbolic reproduction and addresses legitimacy continuity most directly.

Viewed together, these models illustrate that structural evolution need not entail uniformity. Rather, it can cultivate resilience through respectful coordination, shared infrastructure, or collective cultural stewardship. Which model is most appropriate will depend on the degree of urgency perceived by system actors and on the cultural risk tolerance of participating traditions. What is essential, however, is that the system evolves intentionally rather than reactively.

The following chapter develops evaluation criteria and impact projections that allow comparison of these models based on quantitative, qualitative, and symbolic dimensions.

| DIMENSION                            | FEDERATED<br>COORDINATION SYSTEM                | SHARED-SERVICES BACKBONE<br>ORGANISATION                           | STEWARDSHIP ALLIANCE<br>WITH DISTRIBUTED<br>MANDATE  |
|--------------------------------------|---|--|--|
| Primary Structural Logic             | Cooperative federation of autonomous traditions | Shared operational infrastructure supporting autonomous traditions | Collective safeguarding of symbolic continuity       |
| Degree of Cultural Autonomy          | Full cultural autonomy retained                 | Full cultural autonomy retained                                    | Full cultural autonomy retained                      |
| Operational Integration Level        | Low   | High   | Moderate   |
| Symbolic Integration Level           | Low   | Low  | High   |
| Main Governance Orientation          | Coordination by consensus                       | Logistical efficiency & risk mitigation                            | Cultural sustainability & narrative continuity       |
| Key Strength                         | Minimal cultural disruption                     | Significant reduction in operational strain                        | Reinforces symbolic legitimacy                       |
| Key Vulnerability                    | Limited capacity to address systemic crises     | Risk of perceived bureaucratisation if poorly communicated         | Limited short-term logistical gains                  |
| Underlying Theoretical Affinity      | Polycentric governance (Ostrom)                 | Transnational integration (Bartlett & Ghoshal)                     | Institutional-cultural continuity (Bourdieu & Scott) |
| Compatibility With Emotional Mandate | Conditional                                     | High   | Very high  |
| Implementation Tempo                 | Gradual   | Accelerated  | Slow + accumulative                                  |
| Risk of Cultural Backlash            | Low   | Moderate   | Very low   |
| Expected Systemic Effect             | Improved cooperation                            | Strengthened resilience  | Secured legitimacy over time                         |

Table 3: *Comparative Explanation of governance models*

The above comparison illustrates that the three governance models do not represent competing visions of the future, but rather divergent pathways through which magical giving systems might negotiate the balance between symbolic continuity and structural pressure. The federated coordination model relies on voluntary collaboration and maintains maximum cultural independence, while the shared-services backbone model seeks to relieve operational strain through institutionalised support mechanisms. The stewardship alliance model prioritises symbolic reproduction and cultural continuity, ensuring that legitimacy is preserved even amid transformation. Each model addresses the core challenges identified in

the qualitative analysis, but they do so through distinct mechanisms and at different tempos, thereby offering system actors a range of structurally coherent options rather than a singular prescribed solution.

To assess the likely effectiveness of these governance architectures, it is necessary to develop evaluative criteria that take into account both the operational pressures identified in the data and the symbolic imperatives described by participants. Conventional performance metrics alone are insufficient, since the primary value of magical giving is emotional rather than financial. The following chapter therefore proposes a set of qualitative and quantitative indicators that reflect logistical resilience, ecological impact, emotional effect, cultural legitimacy, and symbolic continuity. These indicators will serve as the basis for comparing the governance models and projecting their potential systemic outcomes.

## **8. Evaluation Criteria and Projected System Impact**

Evaluating governance reform in magical giving systems requires an assessment framework that reflects both the symbolic mission and the operational pressures highlighted in the qualitative material. Standard efficiency metrics cannot fully capture the emotional and ritual value these systems generate. Thus, in line with the broader literature on nonprofit evaluation (Badelt, 1999; Ebrahim & Rangan, 2014; Meyer & Simsa, 2019), this chapter proposes a multidimensional evaluation framework. The aim is to establish credible, theoretically grounded criteria by which the three governance models outlined in Chapter 7 can be compared. The framework distinguishes between operational, cultural, and emotional performance dimensions, acknowledging that the purpose of magical giving is simultaneously material and symbolic.

Before developing each dimension in turn, the following table summarises the full set of Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) that constitute the proposed evaluation matrix.



| DOMAIN                 | KEY PERFORMANCE INDICATOR (KPI)         | INTENDED MEASUREMENT FOCUS                                |
|------------------------|---|---|
| Operational Resilience | Production capacity stability           | Ability to produce expected gift volumes without overload |
| Operational Resilience | Delivery reliability rate               | Timely and consistent seasonal delivery across regions    |
| Operational Resilience | Ecological sustainability index         | Material sourcing, energy usage, carbon impact            |
| Operational Resilience | Crisis adaptability score               | Capacity to maintain function under disruption            |
| Cultural Continuity    | Ritual coherence preservation           | Degree to which symbolic traditions remain stable         |
| Cultural Continuity    | Narrative legitimacy perception         | Public and familial confidence in the tradition           |
| Cultural Continuity    | Intergenerational transmission strength | Continuity of belief and participation across age cohorts |
| Emotional Impact       | Measured reassurance effect             | Subjective experience of being remembered and valued      |
| Emotional Impact       | Wonder intensity indicators             | Depth of fascination, excitement, anticipation            |
| Emotional Impact       | Post-event affective retention          | Emotional durability beyond the event itself              |

Table 4: KPIs to implement

## 8.1 Operational Resilience Indicators

Operational performance cannot be reduced to throughput; rather, it reflects the capacity of the system to sustain itself without exhausting its actors. Reflexive accounts from participants revealed acute production pressures, seasonal time compression, and expanding logistical burdens. Combined with insights from Ostrom's polycentric governance theory (2010) and Provan and Kenis (2008), operational resilience emerges as a necessary precondition for system survival. The KPIs associated with this domain aim to capture supply continuity, delivery reliability, ecological sustainability, and adaptive capacity. This reflects growing recognition in nonprofit evaluation literature that functional stability is inseparable from moral mission (Ebrahim & Rangan, 2014). In the context of magical giving, operational indicators serve as a diagnostic tool, identifying structural vulnerability while informing targeted reform.

## 8.2 Cultural Continuity Indicators

Given the symbolic foundation of magical giving, cultural continuity represents a decisive evaluation domain. The interviews revealed pronounced anxiety about potential erosion of ritual meaning if structural transformation were undertaken insensitively. Weber's insights on traditional legitimacy (1922/1978) and Bourdieu's analysis of symbolic capital (1986) demonstrate that institutional meaning is preserved not simply through repetition, but through intentional transmission and recognition. As such, KPIs related to ritual coherence, narrative legitimacy, and intergenerational reproduction are essential. They assess whether system reform preserves – or inadvertently weakens – the symbolic foundations upon which the system depends. These indicators are therefore indispensable for avoiding the kind of cultural failures Drucker identified as endemic to organisational transformation (Drucker, 1974).

### 8.3 Emotional Impact Indicators

The primary output of magical giving is emotional rather than material. Children's experience of wonder, comfort, anticipation, and affirmation constitutes the system's defining *raison d'être*. Wynne and Rutter (2023) argue that emotional reassurance forms the invisible infrastructure of belonging in ritual systems; Collins (2004) describes emotional energy as the sustaining force of ritual solidarity. Accordingly, KPIs related to reassurance, wonder, and emotional persistence serve not as supplementary measures, but as core indicators of system effectiveness. Their purpose is not to quantify enchantment reductively, but to ascertain whether structural reform enhances or diminishes emotional outputs. Consequently, emotional indicators must be interpreted cautiously and longitudinally, combining qualitative depth with contextual sensitivity.

Taken together, the framework presented here offers an evaluative architecture that captures the complexity of magical giving systems. It recognises that operational resilience, cultural continuity, and emotional impact are mutually constitutive dimensions. In the next chapter, these indicators are used to project the likely systemic effects of each governance model.

## 9. Summary and Directions for Future Research

This study examined the structural dynamics of magical giving systems through an inductive qualitative approach, integrating interview-based insights with established theoretical frameworks. The empirical material demonstrated that these systems fulfil an essential emotional mandate rooted in recognition, belonging and ritual reassurance. At the same time, interviewees described increasing strain generated by fragmented production processes, seasonal time compression and rising environmental pressures. The analysis showed that while symbolic legitimacy remains robust, the operational foundations underpinning magical giving have become fragile, and that actors across traditions express a latent aspiration for coordinated reinvention.

The interpretive integration of the findings with Weber's theory of rationalisation, Bourdieu's concept of symbolic capital and Foucault's account of discursive power highlighted that the system stands at a critical juncture. The symbolic logic upon which magical giving depends continues to demand enchantment, yet the structural conditions necessary to sustain it require adaptation. Chapter 6 therefore articulated the key design requirements implied by the data: reform must preserve cultural integrity, redistribute coordination burdens without bureaucratic disenchantment and enable adaptive continuity from within. Three governance architectures were subsequently developed to illustrate alternative pathways for system reinvention: a federated coordination model, a shared-services backbone and a stewardship alliance. The evaluation framework introduced in Chapter 8 proposed multidimensional indicators to assess the operational, cultural and emotional implications of each model.

While the present study advances understanding of magical giving as an institutional ecosystem, several avenues for future research remain open. First, the empirical foundation could be expanded through additional interviews across under-represented regions, particularly in areas where local traditions have

limited documentation. Second, longitudinal research would be required to assess how system actors respond to emerging coordination efforts over time. Third, comparative studies across other emotionally anchored nonprofit systems may offer further insight into how symbolic legitimacy interacts with organisational adaptation under pressure. Such research would deepen the empirical base and allow systematic evaluation of potential restructuring processes.

In summary, this working paper demonstrates that magical giving is both symbolically indispensable and structurally vulnerable. Its future will depend on the capacity of system actors to preserve enchantment while developing new organisational forms capable of sustaining ritual meaning under evolving conditions.

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