



STUDY NOTES EPISODE 17: TALKING ABOUT FESTIVALS AND CELEBRATIONS

TALKING ABOUT FESTIVALS AND CELEBRATIONS

One of the major topic areas in IELTS, in both Speaking and Writing, is Society. A common sub-topic of the larger topic of Society is customs. Customs include **celebrations, festivals, traditions and holidays**.

What people celebrate and how they celebrate varies greatly from one country to the next, from one society to the next and sometimes from one town or village to the next.

Because celebrations and festivals can be very particular for different cultures and people, the language required for describing what happens can be very specific.

Celebrations

Celebrations can be for the whole of a society, or at a personal level, for the family or an individual.

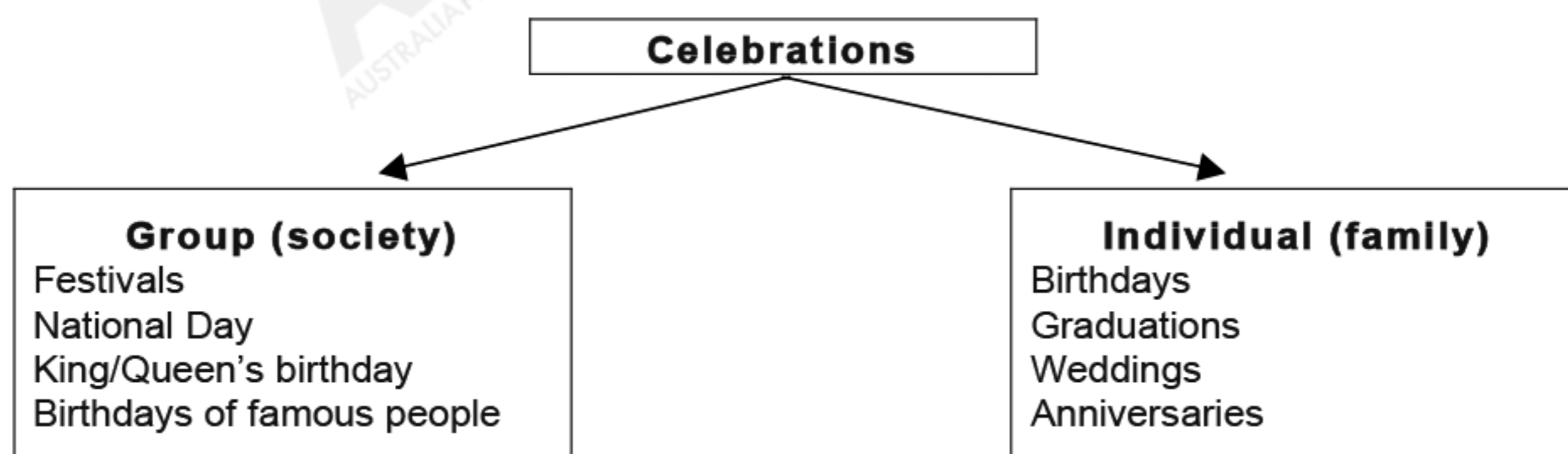
What kinds of things do we celebrate? Different people celebrate different kinds of things at different levels or degrees, in different ways and for different reasons.

IELTS Tips

It is good practice to brainstorm a variety of topic areas and gather some thoughts, ideas and language, so that if you are asked a question in this area, you are able to respond more easily and confidently.

Identify and learn useful vocabulary for the topic and related topics.

Also think about different ways to organise your answer, and practise supporting what you say or write with reasons and examples. Take the topic of festivals and celebrations and begin to develop your ideas!



When given the topic of celebrations it is a good idea to think of **what** we celebrate, **why** we celebrate and **how** we celebrate. What is behind the celebration? What is the history and significance of the celebration? Always offer **explanations, reasons and examples** to expand on your answer and to help make clear what you are trying to say.



Celebrations at the Group or Social Level

The whole of society celebrates festivals, national days, and birthdays of important people. Famous people might include the emperor, the king or queen, a famous leader or important person such as Nelson Mandela in South Africa, Martin Luther King in the United States, and Christopher Columbus in many countries in the Americas.

Festivals which the whole society, or a significant part of the society celebrate, can be either traditional and religious, or significant in the political and social history of the country. Therefore there are religious and secular festivals.

Religious Festivals

Festivals can sometimes have a long history, and are often linked to the seasons and/or phases of the moon (the lunar calendar). The background or history to some festivals can also be religious, or derive from cults. Festivals can include religious feast days or holy days.

Major festivals include the **Spring Festival** or **Chinese New Year** in many Asian countries; **Songkran** in Thailand; **Ramadan** in Muslim countries; **Hanukkah** and **Yom Kippur** for Jews; **Diwali** for Hindus; various significant events in the life of Buddha for many people in Asia; and **Christmas** and **Easter** in countries where the Christian faith is dominant. Religious festivals can also include fasting – the opposite of feasting!

When we celebrate certain religious customs we follow particular and significant rites and **rituals**. A ritual is a deeply significant religious custom. Sometimes it is believed that if these rituals are not properly observed, then bad luck will follow. It is customary in the West for the bride to wear white at a wedding, but in China red is the traditional colour. The New Zealand Maoris perform the ritual of the *haka*, a warrior dance with particular words, gestures and dance steps. The haka is meant to strengthen Maoris in the face of attack, and frighten their attackers. Today, New Zealand footballers perform the haka before a game to help ensure they win.

The issue of **omens** and **superstitions** – good and bad luck – is related. It is traditional in Anglo-Saxon culture for the bride to wear “something old, something new, something borrowed and something blue” – all for good luck! The colour red in China is a highly auspicious (ie lucky) colour. Some believe black cats and broken mirrors are bad omens.

Numbers are considered in some cultures to be lucky, or unlucky. Friday 13th is considered in some cultures to be a very unlucky day and some people, who are superstitious, believe they should not go out of the house in order to avoid bad luck on that day. Chinese believe that the number four is unlucky because it is pronounced the same way as the word for death.



Secular Festivals

Thanksgiving is an important celebration in the United States of America (USA) and Canada. The Fourth of July or Independence Day commemorates the day when the United States was established, when independence was won from Britain.

There are arts and music festivals in many countries. Some famous arts festivals are: the Edinburgh Festival in Scotland; the Bayreuth Festival in Germany; the Salzburg Festival in Austria; the Sydney Festival and the Adelaide Festival in Australia. These are usually summer festivals, organised by a government or arts group in summer, the time when people usually have annual holidays and so a lot of free time to enjoy themselves.

There are several aspects to a festival:

1. the **history** of the festival – how has the festival developed and changed over the years, and
2. the **significance** of the festival – why is it important and what does it mean for society and its people.

Break down a topic and look at it from different angles. This will help you better manage possible questions in IELTS.

Celebrations at the Individual Level

At the individual level, we celebrate **birthdays, graduations, weddings, and anniversaries**. In some religions, an important celebration is when a boy becomes a man. Certain birthdays and anniversaries are seen as more significant than others – 18, 21, 40 and 50th birthdays; 25, 40, 50 and 60th wedding anniversaries. These anniversaries are given names – silver, ruby, gold and diamond, respectively.

We celebrate these occasions in traditional ways. In some countries, on a birthday, a cake, greeting cards and gifts are presented to the person celebrating the day. Friends and family say “Happy Birthday!” There might be a song to sing - “Happy Birthday to you!”, or “For he’s a jolly good fellow!”, and then three cheers – “Hip, hip, hooray!” There might be a party with a cake and candles – one for every year.

The Structure of a Spoken Description - organising your answer

When we want to describe something we usually introduce the topic of the description so the listener knows what to expect. We introduce the topic and also the range and focus we intend to concentrate on or develop. This introductory part is called the **Orientation**.

The orientation is followed with a sequence or list of details about what is being described, some examples with some commentary on the importance or significance of what is being described.

From these opening statements we know straightaway what we should be told, what we might hear. The listener would then expect the picture to be filled out with details.



Take St Valentine's Day for example:

| | | |
|-------------------------|--------------------------------------|--|
| Orientation | What do we celebrate and when | Identification of the celebration St Valentine's Day 14 February |
| | Why do we celebrate | Description of the background, history and significance of the celebration Roman and Christian connections: Lupercalia was a Roman festival observed from February 13 through 15, and was connected to fertility. St Valentine was a Christian saint, an early bishop of Genoa, Italy who died around AD 307. The day became associated with romantic love in the Middle Ages. |
| List of Details | How do we celebrate | Details of the celebration It is the traditional day on which lovers express their love for each other by: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • sending Valentine's cards • presenting flowers, or • offering confectionery such as chocolate, as well as • having a romantic candlelit meal together. |
| Concluding Words | | Maybe overcommercialised these days, but it is a happy day celebrating romantic love and has been adopted by countries and peoples all over the world. |

Think of ways to expand your answer with explanations and examples:

Give an explanation

It is customary these days for the man to take the initiative and invite the woman (his girlfriend or wife) to have dinner - a romantic, private meal. The woman would expect him to pay.

Give examples

The man usually gives the woman a gift, such as a bouquet of flowers or a box of chocolates.

St Valentine's Day has become overcommercialised. For example, the amount of advertising promoting the event has increased enormously. This advertising places a great deal of pressure on young couples to publicly demonstrate their love for each other by booking a table at a restaurant, buying expensive flowers and even placing expressions of their love in newspapers, at no small cost.



Grammatical Features of the Language of Description

1. The Present Simple Tense and Time Phrases

In English when we want to talk about customs, habits and activities, and how often they occur or how often we do them, we use the Present Simple Tense and a variety of time phrases and adverbs of frequency – always, sometimes, never, every summer, on Friday nights, every ten years.

In English, verbs can have Active or Passive Voice. However, when we describe something in English we still use the Present Simple Tense, whether the verb is in the Active or Passive Voice form.

Example:

Habits/customs The Cambodian Water Festival **is celebrated** every year.

The verb here is in the Passive form – **is celebrated**.

The Present Simple Tense has several uses in English. Primarily, it is used to describe people, places and things, states and relationships, facts and truisms (ie things that are true).

For example:

| | |
|---|-------------|
| There are quite a few aspects to the Water Festival. | Fact |
| Water means so much to many Cambodians. | Fact |
| The majority of Cambodians live in the countryside. | Fact |
| The rural population rely on water. | State |
| Basically, they almost worship water. | Fact |
| The full moon promises a bountiful harvest. | Description |
| The moon appears biggest at this time of year. | State |
| The sun rises in the east and sets in the west. | Truism |

2. Describing Past Habits and Customs

How do we describe past habits and customs? The Modal Verb, Past Tense **would** can be used.

Example:

It seems from the history that the king **would** celebrate the Water festival every year.

Would here is the same as **used to**. It is possible to say: that the king **used to** celebrate the Water festival every year.



3. Using Articles to track participants in a description

We use the article **the** in English to identify something in particular, something unique. Superlatives in English are used to identify **the best**, **the most** – only one of something, and so have the article **the** because this means they are unique.

Examples:

the king (there is usually only ONE king)
the country (ie Cambodia)
the countryside (not **the city**)
the full moon
the marine force (**the** navy, not **the** army)
the most popular

We use the article **a** to identify one of many:

Examples:

There are quite **a few aspects** to this festival.
The full moon is **a good omen**.
It promises **a bountiful harvest**.

However, when we describe groups, or when we generalise, no article is used.

Examples:

Water is extremely important for farmers.
History repeats itself. We need to study our history.
Farming and **agriculture** provide livelihoods for millions of **Cambodians**.

Rule for using Articles

We can state a rule to help when deciding when to use an article.

Rule:

If we can say **in general** then **NO article** is required.
If we can say **in particular**, use **the**.

Examples:

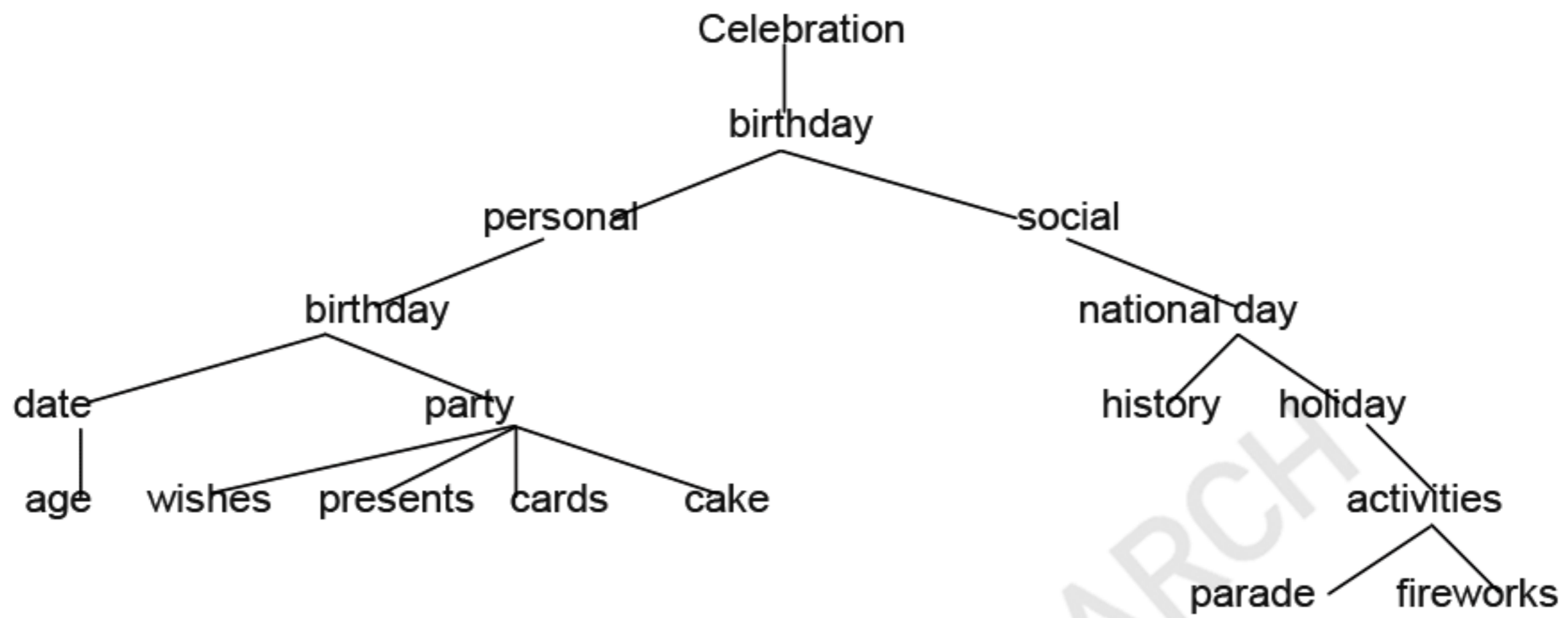
the (particular) **Cambodian people**
the (particular) **water in the** (particular) **Murray River**
the (particular) **history of England**

people (in general) **in Cambodia**
water (in general) **is essential for life** (in general)



Developing your vocabulary

Develop your vocabulary for this topic by creating word trees. Word trees provide a visual aid to memory.



Think of a festival in your country. How might you organise a response to a question about festivals in your country?

