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Christmas traditions and performance rituals: a look at Christmas celebrations in a Nordic context

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Abstract

The article explores some pre-Christian, Christian and post-Christian celebratory rituals that exist in a Nordic tradition of Christmas feasts, with a particular focus on the Norwegian Yule. A key theme is the presentation and discussion of rituals and performative events in the described celebrations, along with observations on the interesting etymology of words and names, as well as myths and legends, associated with Yule celebrations. The article looks at some roots of theatre in early religious ritual and dramatic elements in folk practice, and at beliefs and customs that have shaped present day Christmas – or Yule - traditions in the North.

L'article explore quelques rites de célébration pré-chrétiens, chrétiens et post-chrétiens qui existent dans une tradition nordique des fêtes de Noël, avec une emphase particulière sur le Noël norvégien. Un thème clef est la présentation et la discussion des rites et d'événements performatifs dans les fêtes décrites, y compris des observations sur l'étymologie des mots et des noms, ainsi que des mythes et des légendes, associés aux fêtes de Noël. L'article explore les racines du théâtre dans les premiers rites religieux et dans les éléments théâtraux de la pratique folklorique, ainsi que les croyances et les coutumes qui ont formé les traditions nordiques du Noël actuel.

Este artículo explora algunos rituales de celebración anteriores a Cristo, Cristianos y post Cristianos que forman parte de una tradición nórdica de las Fiestas Navideñas, con un enfoque particular en la Navidad noruega. Un tema clave es la presentación y la conversación sobre rituales y eventos representativos de las celebraciones descritas, además de observaciones sobre la interesante etimología de palabras y nombres al mismo tiempo que se consideran mitos y leyendas, asociados a las celebraciones de la Natividad. Este artículo tiene en cuenta algunas raíces del teatro en primitivos rituales religiosos, los elementos dramáticos de las prácticas tradicionales, y también las creencias y costumbres que han formado la Navidad actual o las tradiciones de la Natividad en los países nórdicos.

Author's biography

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This article grew out of a project with our drama students at Bergen University College, Norway, in December 2002. I wanted to introduce the students to pre-Christian roots of Yule, and to give them an historical introduction to extant dramatic/ritual Christmas customs in our country. During the research process I became intrigued in the etymology of words and names associated with Christmas and the 'figures' and 'spirits' belonging to the Christmas season. It gave me an angle by which to make our students conscious of the way the Church has appropriated ancient religious beliefs and rituals, and a means to inspire them to take another look at our cultural past. It also helped in making more visible probable remnants of ancient dramas embedded in many of our Christmas celebratory rituals, and transformations of such dramas and rituals which have occurred during christianisation and up to our (more or less) post-Christian time. Our students gave a surprise performance in the staff room just before the Christmas break, showing the two sides of the Saint Lucia traditions described at the end of the article: a Saint Lucia procession in one group confronted by a pagan-inspired Lussi in another. It is the intention of this article that its content may inspire others to develop a performance project for their own Christmas.

A number of theories exist regarding the origins of theatre. Among these are theories based on the idea of theatre developing from religious cult or religious ritual, theories presenting the origin of theatre in mimetic rituals of totemic hunting clans, theories seeing the origin of theatre in shamanism, theories purporting that the origin of theatre is to be found in play, or that the origin of theatre comes from man's enjoyment of mimetic acts – that there is a general human theatrical faculty (primeval theatre) which can be found in all cultures. The reader should keep this context in mind, as the article does not purport to develop a thesis on the intrinsic inter-relationship of ritual and drama as such.

The word jól was in pre-Christian times the name of a feast celebrated by sacrifice on mid-winter night, January 12th. According to the Norwegian historian Olav Bø (199:11) the Anglo-Saxon géol and the English yule are the same word. From these words the names of the 'Christmas-months' were derived: November/December and December/January: the old Norse word ýlir marked the time from November 14th to December 13th, the Anglo-Saxon word giuli was used for both December and January, and the Gothic word jiuleis denoted December. It seems logical that these names point towards a common Germanic origin for a pagan mid-winter feast, which here in Norway is still called jul. This is an age-old time for ritual, procession, festivity, merriment: Merry Christmas!

Falk and Torp (1994:339) point out that in old Germanic the primary form for jul is je(g)hwla- (from Indo-Germanic jequeo-). This is a form that has a probable connection with the Latin jocus - jest – which shares its root with jocolatores, the travelling jesters / actors in the Middle Ages. So, it is very tempting to give ear to Falk and Torp's suggestion that the ancient jól-feast was a form of saturnalia, like the winter solstice festival (see below). The fact that the French word joli, the English jolly and the Italian giulivo come from the same Germanic roots underlines the aspect of something merry and playful, and jest, joke and ridicule belong through the ages to the basic fare of the theatre.

Dramatic and Religious Seasons

The most important seasons in pagan life - and for pre-Christian drama – were winter solstice and the celebration of the new life season in the early spring. Ritual drama like the burning of King Winter or the sword-dances and round-dances of Springtime belong, according to the Austrian Theatre historian Heinz Kindermann (1966: 398), to the primeval theatre of man. And such traditions - often expressed with masks, ritual dances, processions, and grotesque – belong in their turn to the origins of carnival and farce, as we shall see. Thus it is hardly accidental that the major Christian seasons – and their accompanying drama cycles - became the Passion plays at Easter and the Nativity plays at yuletide.

Even if the exact meaning of the ancient word jól is not known, an interesting association with its origin exists through the Norse god Odin (Wotan). An entry in Falk and Torp (339) indicates that Odin in old Norse is referred to as Jólnir (Lord of the Yule), when he is leading the wild band of ghost riders – jóleskreia / oskoreia - raging across sky and land at yule-tide. There could be a connection here with a Teuton Feast of the Dead at the winter solstice, and with yule as the time for communicating with the dead. But there could also be a connection to the Norse god of midwinter Ullr or his stepfather Thor. The latter is best known as the god of thunder, but he is also a fertility god. The pagan Vikings worshipped Thor and his goats. According to the myth his goats were slaughtered every evening and rose again the next morning. It could be that the little drama performed by masked participants in old 'yule-buck' processions (see below) in which the leader carrying a goat head and dressed in a goatskin would 'die' and then return to life, is a carryover from pre-Christian dramatic rites. It could be an act of sacrifice to the gods as propitiation for a good year and a ritual act symbolizing the death of winter and resurrection to a new and life-giving year. A connection may also exist to the Norse god Frey. There is an old expression of 'drikke jul' (to drink to yule), which was also associated with 'Frøys leik' - playing for Frey (verse 6 of Torbjørn Hornklove's Haraldskvede - quoted in Bø 1993:9). Frey is the Goddess of fertility, vegetation and a good harvest. There is a theory that the Vikings played some sort of ceremonial games or dances to the honour of Frey, but evidence is very scarce (Kjølner 1980:30).

However, theatre history research indicates that some form of ritually-rooted popular drama may very well have existed in the North during the Viking period. The Norwegian researcher Kristin Lyhman (1985) suggests the existence of early theatrical expression based on rune finds, and the Swedish researcher Terry Gunnell has pointed out that such a tradition would have provided a general context for early dramatic performance of the dialogic poems of the *Edda* (1995:32).

In old Norse tradition much importance was put on the brewing and serving of beer at this time of the year. The Norse solstice feast should, according to tradition, be a celebration of a good year; one should have jól beer, and drink to the honour of the gods. It was also a time for inviting neighbours and relatives

for a feast with good drink and food – the best products of the previous season – in many ways a custom showing signs of what has later become known as Thanksgiving, but which was in old Viking times known as *haustblot* (autumn sacrifice). According to the Norwegian *Gulating* legislation of the 10th and 11th century the beer should be ready by the Holy Mass of November 1st, which is also the time for the celebration of St. Martin. In Norway and other European countries dramatic traditions were associated with *Mortensaften* (Martinmas Eve), November 11th. This celebration seems to have taken up several customs from a pre-Christian autumn feast. In many countries it marked the official start of carnival or *Shrovetide* – named after shriving, or absolution through confession, that was the central ritual of the period-. The Norwegian comedy writer Ludvig Holberg (1684-1754) describes from his young days in Bergen processions in the town on *Mortensaften*, where young people marched in a procession led by a boy carrying a goose on a stick and sang a song about *Mortens gås*, after the roast goose served this day (1920: 68).

Although there is no solid evidence of a carnival tradition in old time Bergen, the Norwegian dramatist and theatre historian Wiers-Jenssen does suggest that carnival plays (*fastelavn-spill*) happened in Bergen. He points to the close connections between Bergen and Germany through the Hanseatic League, and that, as early as 1625, farces in the German manner were performed in the city – much like in Nürnberg where the *Fasching Spiele*, the origins of farce, were made for the fun of it and with topics from daily life. 'Artisans make them, travel from house to house, from inn to inn, and perform them' (Wiers-Jenssen 1921:16/50).

As already briefly mentioned earlier, interesting roots for the carnival/*Shrovetide* farces may be found in the performing rituals of the ancient Greek-Roman comic processions and dramatics. According to Kindermann convincing evidence exists of a common ground between ancient comic performance and pre-Christian drama in Germany and Scandinavia. He argues persuasively that popular comic theatre traditions in Europe most likely originated first from the ancient *mimus* – the early mimetic traditions that grew out of fertility rites and spring celebrations – and only secondly from the comic scenes of the Christian religious theatre of the late middle ages, the latter also stemming from the same ancient performance roots (397-402). If his theory holds good, it constitutes a good example of pre-Christian tradition influencing, but also being taken up by, Christian tradition. So in Christian drama of the Middle Ages the Church transformed and incorporated pre-Christian dramatic elements (like procession and chorus song), and/or allowed comic scenes and farce to function either as a safety valve or as a moral corrective, like the Feast of Fools and Carnival.

The Norse solstice festival became, through Christianity, a celebration of the birth of Christ, as it did in all European countries. In Norway Håkon the Good ruled that the old *midtvintersblot* (mid-winter sacrifice) be moved from January 12th to December 25th (Falk and Torp, 1994:339). *Hellig-tre-kongers-dag* ('Three Kings Holy Day', or Epiphany) became the first Christian festival. Epiphany in our church calendar is placed at the first Sunday after New Year, but originally it was an early Nativity celebration of December 25th, the same day as the Romans celebrated the birth of the Sun-God. This was in the Julian calendar the day of the turning of the sun. Two other Roman festivals at this time of the year were incorporated in the Christian Christmas celebrations: the *Saturnalia* (in mid-December) and New Years Day, the start of the official year. During the *Saturnalia* all class differences were suspended and all people intended to enjoy life. At the New Year's festival gifts were given, plans were made, promises issued and omens taken – many traits that we recognise from the same season even today. The Roman *Saturnalia* feast also contained role reversal and revelry, a ritual practice continued in the middle ages as the Feast of Fools). A King of Fools was set to rule over an upside-down-turned 'kingdom' with the master as slave and the slave as the master (Nygaard 1992:126).

From the Star to Santa Claus and Julenisse

In Bergen a remnant of a lost liturgical Christmas play existed up to the end of the 19th century. It was called *Stjernespillet* (The Play of the Star). Most likely this was a play about The Three Magi and performed at Epiphany. In its earliest fashion it had probably many characteristics of the original play, but from the time where records exist -1609, according to Wiers-Jenssen - it had become more of a procession with dramatic elements than a play. It was first the schoolboys – students from the cathedral school – who were in charge of *Stjernespillet*. They had both dramatic and musical training in their education (cf. the School Drama tradition of the Humanists). Later they were forced to share the responsibilities of performing the play with artisan guilds as well. We know that at its peak of popularity as many as five troupes performed it in different parts of Bergen. But after the demise of the craft unions, the tradition faded. Star troupes of varying artistic qualities filed through the streets at Christmas time, and by the end of the 19th century they were forbidden under the warrant of being a street disturbance.

The most important ingredients of the star-processions were the star (heading the processions carried on a tall stick), the song (serious and edifying), and the collection of gifts at each and every house where the procession stopped. The collection was usually performed by Joseph, a fool-like figure hopping and skipping, holding out his cap for the gifts, while the kings were singing:

*Ok no e den livsalige tid forbi,
(and now the blessed moment is over)
for no kommer Josef med hætto si.
(for here comes Joseph with his cap)
(Wiers-Janssen, in Losnedal 1980: 24)*

Here there is an interesting dramatic contrast between the holy song in the beginning and the popular song in the end. It was probably created mainly as entertainment, or for the purposes of the dramatic structure. However, in the context of the research for this article, although I have no other evidence for it, it also seems to be associated with ancient and medieval religious performance traditions, exhibiting elements like procession, impersonation, song and dance, the combination of positive and negative powers and contrasting the sacred with the profane.

The Norwegian theatre historian Kari Gaarder Losnedal (1980:21-24) points out many interesting parallels between the old star processions and the present-day julebukk tradition. (To my knowledge no English parallel exists for this latter phenomenon; the closest may be the tradition of carol singers at Christmas Eve in some English speaking countries). In the julebukk tradition, which here in Bergen takes place on New Year's Eve, children (both boys and girls) wander from house to house, sing Christmas carols, and collect gifts (mostly sweets, Christmas tidbits and fruits) as a reward for the performance. They are costumed and masked. Here too, the often absurd contrast between the (serious) content of the carol and the (profane) costuming can be observed. What is now missing is the Star, and the link to the origin of Epiphany has become increasingly blurred. In recent years the commercialisation of Christmas, and the Americanisation of its traditional expressions, have taken place to the extent that carols are now occasionally replaced by pop-songs and the children wear party or Halloween masks. We are experiencing a watering-down of tradition, partly because of globalisation and commercialisation, and partly because of a loss of significance in the tradition itself. As Losnedal argues: 'By the very fact that the "main character" has been dropped, the procession has changed its character'. This is a common when traditions change or disappear.

As already mentioned above, there exists also a pre-Christian origin of the julebukk. The origin of the yule-buck (or the yule-goat) could be the billy-goat which was slaughtered at yule for the hopes of a good and prosperous year. Later it became the name for a person who went around at yule-tide, costumed in a pelt and usually wearing a goat mask. Originally a rural tradition, this was commonly a fearsome mask worn by young men (not children). The mask had horns and shag and could be worn on a stick or directly on a person's head. By tradition the goat was supposed to entertain by violent and comical jumps and kicks. A goat song usually accompanied the visit, and before the goat left the house, beer or a nip were served. Different local variations of the yule-buck-tradition have been reported by historians throughout the country. Bø is an authoritative source.

A theory indicates that the tradition also contained an element of social control. The visitors in their roles as yule-bucks could check that the revelries took place according to custom, and if they were not served well, the punishment could be that the house or the farm would not be visited the next year (Ohrvik, 2002).

There are disagreements between researchers whether the julebukk belongs to ancient pagan fertility traditions (cf. the function of the goat in the cult of Dionysos), or if it more likely is a remnant of church processions from the Middle Ages, in which the one who impersonated the devil was wearing a mask with horns. Bø finds the latter theory more probable (127). In a similar fashion to Bø, Losnedal suggests (21) that julebukken has come from the figure dressed in a sheep skin and in chains who accompanied Saint Nicholas on his wanderings in December in search of good children. (According to legend Nicholas was bishop of Myra in Turkey about 300 AD). The pair symbolised the victory of the good over evil. Later in history the two separated; St. Nicholas became Julenissen or Father Christmas and julebukken went his own ways.

Julenissen stems from about 1800, and is probably a misinterpretation from pictures of a white-bearded

St. Nicolaus. His name was Anglicised and became Santa Claus. However, in the Nordic countries another adaptation has probably come about as a mix of the Norse *gardvord* (*husnisse*, *tomtegubbe*) in popular superstition and the catholic St. Nicholas. Our supernatural nisse creature is similar to the brownie, leprechaun or pixie. In people's imagination he is portrayed as a small man, wearing grey clothes, red pointed cap and a long beard. Just like the *julebuk*, he is a being who does not bring Christmas gifts, but is himself a demander of food and treats. In old rural Norway much attention was paid to him. He is a creature with great strength and can be a helper with the farm work. As a reward he receives good food and drink, particularly on Christmas Eve. If not treated well, he can turn malicious and cause harm to the farm, the crops and the people. He belongs to the supernatural beings which in our folklore are called *vette* – spirits who live near humans, and with whom the humans need to be on friendly terms. The same applies to *Lussi*.

Lucia and Lussi

Even if already from old times the *jól* season was a time for the awaiting of good food and drink and gifts, family gatherings and jolly companionship with good neighbours, it was also a season of uneasiness and fear of the dark forces. There was the *Lussi*, and the most scary night of all: *Lussinatta* (the *Lussi* Night). As Bø points out (20), little help is to be found in the modern concept of Santa Lucia to explain *Lussi*. Popular tradition is rooted in another custom and belief than the Christian Lucia alternative. The belief in *Lussi* was strongly connected to the carrying out of the work tasks. Again and again the lore prescribes that such

and such work must be finished, or else the *Lussi* will come to punish. *Lussi* is conceived of as a woman, usually with evil traits, like a feminine demon. Such a spirit is found in mid- and southern Europe as well, and given the name of darkness, like *Lucia die dunkle* (the dark Lucia). Her contrast is *Lucia die helle* (the fair Lucia), a Christian take-over which is associated with Saint Lucia.

The old date for the *Lussi* Night is December 13th, regarded as the longest night of the year and associated with the solstice. That was carried over into the new era. Between *lussi* night and *jól* all kinds of trolls were out and about. It was particularly dangerous to be out during *Lussi* Night. Children who had done mischief had to take special care, because *Lussi* could come down through the chimney and take them. Bø explains that the lore also tells about a whole *Lussi* group travelling past: the *Lussiferda*. They were named as in a verse: *Lisle-Ståli* and *Store-Ståli*, *Ståli Knapen* and *Tromli Harebakka*, *Sisill* and *Surill*, *Hektetryni* and *Botill*. They could take people away, just like the *Oskoreia* or *Jólaskreia* could. This is another company of spirits (*vetter*), riding horses, and which towards yule-tide journey through air and over land and water, leaving eeriness and discomfort. Although not mentioned in any of my sources, it is very tempting to look at Father Christmas' journey with his reindeer as a commercial relic inspired by such popular superstition.

Another name for this phenomenon is *Aasgaardsreia*, from oldn. *reið* (=ride, riding train). The myth of *Aasgaardsreia* corresponds to the German folk-belief in *wütende Heer* (raging host), originally from *Wuotan's* (=Odin's=*Jólnir's*) *Heer*. (Falk and Torp, 6.). I find the referencing of Odin's name as *Jólnir* of particular interest here. This was the name used for Odin in old Norse at yule-tide, referring to him as the commander of *jólaskreia*. An interesting supplement to this is an observation made by the Norwegian theatre researcher Jon Nygaard. Outlining the links of the fool figure and pagan religious rituals, in which the fool was a fertility demon, Nygaard refers to the fool character *Harlequin* and the possible origin of this name from *Her(e)la cynz* (the lord of the dead host). This name can also stem from the Germanic *Herleke* (from *Harilo*=commander of the host). This, in turn, refers to the great commander: *Wode*, *Wodan*, *Wuotan* or *Odin*. Several stories' (the wild bunch?). Originally, like the Norwegian *aasgaardsreia*, it was a feared train of the dead. But during time it lost its importance and became associated with a train of boisterous comic demons, flying through the air, accompanied by song and jingle bells... (Nygaard:126).

The Saint Lucia tradition, then, is another example of christianisation of pagan beliefs and customs. This Swedish tradition, which seems to have spread throughout the Western world, is probably an old culture-loan from Germany and explains the use of lights (*Lucia* from *lux* = light). *Lucia* adorned with the lights resembles the Christ Child (*Christkindchen*), who in certain parts of Germany wanders about in the community and entertains the children. This child is usually a costumed girl carrying a crown of lights. The name Saint Lucia given to this light procession tradition comes, according to Bø (23), from the Italian saint who suffered a martyr's death under the Roman Emperor Diocletian in Syracuse, Sicily around 300 AD, and whose memory was already celebrated by about 400 AD. (internet 1999). In one of the stories associated with her legend, she was working to help Christians hiding in the catacombs. In order to bring with her as much food and drink as possible, she needed to have her hands free. She solved this problem by making a wreath to wear on her head on to which she attached lights. Thus she managed to

see in the darkness of the catacombs.

There are traces of the legends of Saint Lucia even in the Nordic countries in the middle ages, and her day of remembrance is also December 13th (just like the Lussi). However, yet another name is relevant here, namely Lucifer. His name has the same etymological background (lux is– latin for 'light'). Once he was an angel of light, then he was dethroned and became the Prince of Darkness. And to go full circle here, Lussi was also conceived of as Adam's first wife, she who was the ancestor of all fairies, goblins, little people – a Lilith-figure ...

So, many of our traditions associated with the Christmas season, are in fact remnants of a much older, pre-Christian tradition associated with jöl. In most European countries the christianisation of the pagan feast established itself quite early manifested in the new name for it: Christmas means Mass of the Saviour, Weinachten means holy night, and Noël means birth celebration. In the Nordic countries, however, the ancient name has been kept. Even in Finnish the word Joulo is being used for Christmas, a loan-word from old Norse stemming from a period before Viking times (NRK, 2002). It seems logical to assume that the solstice festival had a particular strong position in the North, where the seasons are so distinct. Many of our yule traditions are dramatic and ceremonial, both in form and content. That may be another reason why they are still alive and keep changing through history.

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