Santas, Saints and Sensibilities – A view from Hungary

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Introduction: Some personal reflections

"In the nursery, belief in Father Christmas is useful, but grown-up people do not think that this proves Father Christmas to be real." (Bertrand Russel, Is there a God?)

„To know what is impenetrable to us really exists, manifesting itself as the highest wisdom and the most radiant beauty, which our dull faculties can comprehend only in their most primitive forms—this knowledge, this feeling is at the center of true religiousness.”(Albert Einstein, Living Philosophies)

Allow me to begin with a personal recollection. When I was a child – I wont tell you when exactly, but it will suffice if I let you know that the Soviet Army was still based in Hungary – we eagerly waited the arrival of December. In old Hungarian, the name of that month was „Christmas month” (karácsony hava). Actually, December 6 was not an official holiday back then, it is still not considered as such today.1 Thus, it was the function of kindergartens and schools to organize the much awaited occasion for children. What was interesting is that the state looked away and despite the rather strict communist rule everyone was involved complicitly to celebrate the coming of Santa Claus (Mikulás) as a joyous occasion. Yet, and this is right where I want to lead, there was an important proviso: namely, that we were waiting not for Santa Claus (Mikulás in Hungarian) but for Father Winter (Télapó). So, Father Winter – dressed as usual in his furry red coat, pointed hat, with long white mustache while carrying a bishop’s crozier or crook - was welcomed sometimes together with his grundgy, horned accomplice, the Krampus, carrying a trident. His frightening looks always quited us as to give credence to Lévi-Strauss who reminds us that the Christmas holiday „functions according to a double rhythm of heightened solidarity and exaggerated antagonism” (1993: 47).

Our world was politically parochial, breeding reverence for our state and family, but not fully constricted. That small town-world from which I still cherish remnants and perspective, seems far away now, but it was our town’s cultural-political landscapes that contributed, as local cultures and communities do, to our ideas and beliefs. Traditions matter, family traditions matter even more (cf. for example, Mason and Muir, 2013). José Ortega y Gasset once remarked that would be fitting to an anthropologist: „Tell me the landscape in which you live, and I will tell you who you are”. Of course, Ortega y Gasset was using the word “landscape” in a metaphorical sense, the way we anthropologists use the terms culture and environment to refer to the connectedness of peoples’ way of life and the way they make their living. So I could paraphrase this as follows: "tell me the rituals you practice, and I will tell you who you are.” That winter celebration was not that unique, all over the former communist countries within the orbit of Soviet domination exhibited similar features as Santa Claus transformed into Father Winter following dictates of the Soviet Union. Within our family sphere the secular Father Winter and his gift-giving provided the sufficient explanation. Thus, the officially organized festive school occasion was made

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1 I do not know any country where Saint Nicholas’ day is a public holiday. Make no mistake: December 6 is a public holiday in Finland but it commemorates Finland’s declaration of independence from Russia in 1917. Similarly, December 6 is a public holiday in Spain, constitution day, created in 1978. In Hungary, Only All Souls’ Day, Christmas, New Year’s Day, and Pentecost are official religious public holidays. New Year’s Day, March 15, May 1, August 20, and October 23 are official civic public holidays.
a bit more cozy and family-centered when you put your clean shoes in the window so Santa would place sweets, nuts and apples (and only those items). Next morning we eagerly ran to see our gifts, sometimes we also received branches, painted white or gold, called „virgács.” This latter was a jolly warning sign that you did not 'behave’ properly the previous year.

In more remote and traditional village communities, December 6 was the occasion for gift-giving to the poor. Women with their faces disguised visited homes where they received small gift packages containing mostly necessities/food. It was called ”Mikulás-walk” (Mikulás-járás). By the 1950s, the custom was abandoned; it became part of children’s folklore connected to nativity play on Christmas eve, or later during the Easter festivities (Good Friday, Good Saturday). It is referred to as ’noise-making’, kolompolás).²

The Mikulás-walk in the 1950s, Western Hungary

Christmas regimes

In Hungary, there are 47 settlements with the name Saint Nicholas (formerly there were more), the number of churches and chapels with Saint Nicholas as their patron saint numbers over 150. Some of these (for example Aracs, Tihany, Gyulafehérvár, Szeged) are early, founded by Byzantine priests and bishops (Bálint, 1977: 398). This history points to the religious foundation of the Hungarian state millennia ago. Throughout the country’s history Christianity has played a variety of functions. Regulating the lives of citizens is one thing, ordering and maintaining the seasonal ritual cycles have also been conducted under the watchful eyes of the

² Darkness and noise-making are included in the Western Christian liturgy at Easter: tenebrae – extinguishing the candles -, and strepitus – big noise.
regimes. Christmas season in Hungary have followed a prescribed pattern and schedule according to the Roman Catholic calendar. The Christmas-New Year holiday season (in short: Christmastide) is separated into two larger cycles, theophany and epiphany. It begins with the first Sunday of Advent, around that time two saints are celebrated with many folkloric traditions (St. Catherine’s Day on 25 November, followed by St. Andrew’s Day on the 30th of the same month). Only then is the day Saint Nicholas (December 6), followed by another prominent traditional feast, day of Saint Lucia (December 13). Traditionally, the Christmas season always started on December 6, not like today when supermarkets start Christmas sales by the beginning of November. Following Christmas and New Year, epiphany – officially the Three Kings Day or 6th of January in Western Christianity (19 January in Eastern Churches) – is the celebration of revelation of God incarnate Jesus Christ (or his baptism), a period that includes Carnival/Shrovetide/Mardi Gras. The winter ritual calendar has remained a period of frantic and boisterous activities.³

Despite strict choreography and canons, official and popular festivities bred new forms and rituals. It is a well-known that condemnation of pagan festivities, like for example that by Saint Isidore of Seville, the courts of the Byzantine emperors of Constantine Vth in the eighth century and that of Basileos hundred years later still celebrated Brumalia and the pagan feasts. Ever since the elevation of Christianity into state religion, winter festivals have been continually changing, actually adapting to the changing socio-cultural environment lending credence to Lévi-Strauss who wrote: „Very old elements are thus shuffled and reshuffled, others are introduced, original formulas perpetuate, transform or revive old customs” (Lévi-Strauss, 1993: 43). Interestingly, scholars are not immune in privileging "ancient" elements in traditions rather than the new inventions!⁴ Whether remnants of the ancient Roman winter festivals of Saturnalia, Dies Natalis Solis Invicti (December 25, Birthday or Feast of the Unconquered Sun), the Kalends, Brumalia, Parentalia and Lupercalia (mid-February) were really incorporated into the Christian Christmas-New Year seasonal rituals is another question entirely, similarly, to the old Germanic and Fenno-Scandinavian Yule traditions.

Aside from the forty years of state socialism between 1948 and 1988, ecclesiastical power was unquestionable and dominant in Hungary. Of course, citizens have to obey the laws and respect the leading role of religious and civil leadership. Naturally, not only the socialist state can be accused of colonizing Christmas, most political regimes – including Nazi Germany – freely alter meanings and trappings of customs and celebrations to their own agendas (for a description of Nazi Christmas see, for example, Perry, 2016). It will serve us to remember the infamous statement by Lenin in the early 1920s against the holy day of St. Nicholas that "let the peasants pray to electricity"; or the young pioneers’ song that "The smoke of the factory is better than the smoke of Incense.” After 1945 as the entire Eastern Europe became Soviet dominated, a war on religion was waged, and the repression and mutation of Christmas ensued. Yet, what was interesting is that Saint Nicholas Day never moved, and the „Feast of the Fir Tree (Fenyőfaünnep) could not overtake the native name for

³ In 567, the Council of Tours gave significance to December 25 and January 6 when "declared the twelve days between Christmas and Epiphany to be one unified festal cycle” (Forbes, 2008: 27).
⁴ The obsession with ‘archaic’ and former elements of culture and rituals are notable among pioneer anthropologists. Franz Boas witnessed Inuit winter celebrations in 1883 in Cumberland Sound, but in his later 1888 writing he wanted to convey a more ‘traditional’ Eskimo ritual without European elements.
Christmas (Karácsony). Throughout socialism Saint Nicholas continued to bring small gifts in children’s shoes as Father Winter on the eve of December 5th. The Soviet Mrs. Santa and their (supposed?) grandchild, Snegurochka (Snow Maiden) were never domesticated into Hungarian winter celebration.

And then came the anni mirabiles of 1989-1990, walls came tumbling down, and democracy in various shapes and forms arrived to Eastern Europe. With that Hungarians – like most former Soviet-bloc states - entered a new era. Religious fervor and new forms of spirituality instantaneously replaced communist atheism. Contemporary Hungarian society, according to the right-wing governmental ideology, heir of the cultural turmoil of inter-war era and making plenty of religious credos, inspires attention to notions of God, Homeland, and Family. Coupled with this new Christian fundamentalism national myths of past greatness, remembrance of prehistoric empires and ruling dynasties (Scythians and Huns especially), and homogeneous national traditions that bespeak of cultural longevity and the cementing of an ancestral terrain are cementing today’s nationalist imagery. However, like other Europeans, most Hungarians adhere to a secular ethos, and only about one-tenth of the population attends church services at major holydays, particularly Christmas and Easter (Tomka, 2006: 301). A disproportionately large number nevertheless belong to alternative religions or sects adhering to some supernatural power; even those who claim non-affiliation hold a good dosage of ‘half-beliefs’ to use Colin Campbell’ phrase (Campbell, 1996, Kürti, 2001, 2015). The majority of citizens readily accept today’s stories and legends anchored to popular holidays and festivals. After three decades of systemic political change, new non-communist identity is continually being invented, one composed of pre-war elements, religiosity, and even pagan, mostly mythical, heroic tales and sanitized if not wholly imagined folkloric traditions. Increasingly, national and local festivals take on a religious air as state symbols fuse with liturgy. Naming of streets, opening new buildings or erecting statues for instance are ritualized occasions with acts of pastoral blessing (Kürti, 2006, 2011). The most privileged institution, the ‘family’, has been placed at the center of governmental policies as the primordial setting for socialization (indoctrination?), Daniel Miller’s observation seems apt: “today Christmas plays a crucial role in the objectification of the family as the locus of a powerful sentimentality and devotion” (2017: 417).

To the point: Father Winter (Télapó) has been put on the back burner, and Mikulás victoriously took his well-deserved place again. Father Winter’s alter-ego, Mikulás, now is everywhere with his Krampus offering gifts and well-wishes to friends, family members and plain by-passers. A full commercialization, led by the American media industry, as if the US dollar has the picture of Santa Claus printed on it. Interestingly, children’s songs about Santa are still the same, even though most were written during socialism.\(^5\) I need interject here: words for Christmas (Karácsony), Santa Claus (Mikulás) and the devilish Krampusz are Slavic and

\(^5\) One of the most popular songs is: “Mikulás is here, his coat is made of snow”, as opposed to the former ‘Father Winter is here, his coat is made of snow.’ Another song (“Hull a pelyhes...”, ’Snow flakes are falling, come to us dear Santa’) is a Hungarian rendition of the English ’Twinkle, twinkle, little star’, originally a French children’s song (Ah! vous dirai-je, maman). The tune was utilized by many composers, for example, it serves also for the well-known ’Alphabet song’ and ‘Baa, Baa, Black Sheep’). The composer László Rossa was the lyricist, perhaps most notable for writing many of the socialist movement songs. Rossa is the socialist counterpart of the Nazi Hans Baumann, who was the celebrated poet and songwriter of National Socialism, he also wrote carols and children’s books.
The first mention of Santa Claus/Mikulás can be read in various journals and newspapers. One sketch is from the Budapest ‘Sunday Times’ of 1865 with Krampus standing behind Santa Claus carrying a large broom. In 1862, for a short period, a Punch-like newspaper was published in Budapest by the name „Krampuszok” (The Krampuses”, edited by Viktor Szokoly). Father Winter’s name in Hungary has a curious trajectory. It was suggested during the inter-war instead of the Slavic Mikulás; the nationalist government was keen to eradicate all Slavic influence in the language. Interestingly, in the 1950s the Soviet Ded Maroz seemed a proper replacement for the religious iconic Santa Claus.

One of the first Hungarian depictions of Santa, an angel, and Krampus, 1901

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6 The word for Christmas (Karácsony) entered Hungarian language in the 15th century, most likely through religious indoctrination. Santa (Mikulás) and his accomplice the Krampusz is of mid-19th century borrowing from Slavic and Austrian middle-class festivity. I found one of the first etymological analysis of the lawyer Géza Toldy very informative (Toldy, 1909). The folklorist Lajos Katona published a short article on Mikulás and Krampusz in 1893 in the Budapest daily, Pesti Napló (December 6.). This latter appeared as an extended analysis in Katona (1912). On the German/Austrian Krampus see Hauschild (2012), Honigman (1977), Rest and Seiser (2016), Rideneour (2016).
In this new national identity industry, the state and local media gladly participate, in fact manipulate the masses to participate in a national, Hungarian Christmas, a fundamentalist religious holiday season beginning with the first Sunday of Advent. It is probably that most countries possess an official Santa Claus house.\textsuperscript{7} Hungary is no exception. The small town of Nagykarácsony in western Hungary created a House of Santa (\textit{Mikulásház}) in 1995. Children can write letters to Santa and also visit his house. From November 17 till December 24 there are various shows, programs and concerts; the main patron for the entire festive month is (interestingly) not Santa but a designated governmental official.\textsuperscript{8} It should be emphasized that the Hungarian settlement was only incorporated in 1952, with only 1300 inhabitants. Thus it cannot really claim (folk) traditions of any kind. Ingeniously, steadfast local elite designed the settlement’s coat of arms specifically as to relate to Christmas nativity folk play. Uniquely in Hungary, perhaps even in Europe as far as I know, it is the only settlement with a nativity depicted on its coat of arms. Tourists now flock to this place where an entirely new festivity has been set up to meet visitors’ demands, an invented tradition that pales in comparison to the extravaganza of the Joulopukki industry in Finland (Pretes, 1995).

\textsuperscript{7} For example, in Russia it is Veliky Ustyug, 600 km north of Moscow, in Germany it is Himmelpfort, 90 km west of Berlin, in Finland it is Rovaniemi in Lapland, in Spain it’s Alicante, in France it’s Andilly and so on ad nauseam.

\textsuperscript{8} See, the home-page: http://www.nagykaracsony.hu/.
Invented traditions: coat of arms of Nagykarácsony, a family home refurbished as Santa’s House in the same settlement
Holidays and sensibilities

Winter is not without its special charm, especially the transformation of nature – freezing temperature, snow falls, shorter days and longer nights; three of the most classic winter activities are snowball fights, building a snowman and sledding or sled riding (skiing is marginal as Hungary does not possess adequate mountain slopes). Not only households but increasingly restaurants and bars all up the ante offering special drinks, dishes and delicacies that are available only during the Christmas season. These days are not unusual to find bartenders, waiters, taxi drivers and even policemen donning Santa’s cap, or even Rudolph’s tiny antlers, all signifying the arrival of the holiday season. Christmas markets and fairs are standard practices nowadays. Coupled with the celebration of the three Sundays of advent, nativity plays are produced, and “living nativity scenes,” in which animals and humans participate, are quite popular.

The holiday season has not decreased in intensity but became more vivid and colorful today as Santa Claus may appear in numerous disguises and alterations. Concomitant rituals follow naturally, the old and the new, recent and ancient elements vie with one another. Santa masterly blends skillful honesty with skillful deception. His entire character is made up of interminable trickery, sleight of hands, and stories of mythical proportions. Hungarian Mikulás always carries his big sack, and participants cannot see actual gifts until Santa pulls them out. His sack is a true cornucopia, overflowing with sweets, occasionally toys and other small presents (real presents are under the Christmas tree brought by Little Jesus or his Angels). The mysteriousness is underlined by the fact that the Mikulás arrives from and leaves to an unknown place. He is teleported everywhere - he has what it takes: Wanderlust and extra human strength. These days in Hungary Santa descends from church towers, mayor’s offices and kindergartens’ rooftops (there are always plenty of volunteers from the police, fireman, or athletes). It is not unusual to see old puffy Santa accompanied by one or two young women dressed as Krampuses (the implied mild eroticism is not a recent invention). The entire procession is made up of opposing yet complementary qualities: Santa awards those who earned it, the Krampus punishes those who deserve it; Santa looks divinely magisterial, his Krampus disgusting (timor dei). He behaves kindly, his accomplice Krampus frighteningly and cruelly. Indeed, plurality, plurivocity, and mysteriousness are imperative to the Gestalt of Santa/Krampus. In short, Santa and Co. delivers, above anything else, hopeful myths: that everything is in order, our lives – despite hardships or suffering throughout the year – are meaningful, and that the future is promising. It seems to be a sacred message from the most profane Saint trickster of all: our life is not just a fleeting illusion, our love is stronger than hate, and that the world would be a much better place if we all love each other. All in all, he affirms our common humanity and the beauty of the world.

The arrival of Santa Claus remains a special occasion for millions today. This is signaled by celebrating his arrival has to be special: unique drinks, plenty of sweets, special music (Santa and Christmas song and carols) and revelry. The overwhelming importance of „sweets” these days is astonishing. Remember: sugar consumption since the 18th century is steadily growing and – I am more than certain – that the excesses of Christmas season (in addition to Easter) has a lot to do with it. While Santa Claus

9 The consumption of sugar reached an unprecedented proportion by the 20th century. From the 1800s to 1900 in Britain annual per capita consumption rose from 2 kg to 40 kg (Mintz, 1985: 73). World sugar production has been steadily growing ever since from 153 million metric tons in 2009 to 188
greets members of households with chocolate, fruit and nuts, Christmas arrives with specially baked cakes. In today’s Hungary, competitions and fairs for baking Christmas gingerbread cookies (mézeskalács) are organized. Utilizing folk nativity play ( betlehemezés) is the most fashionable. Uniquely, a small town of Geresdlak leads the way as women recreate their entire town with miniature gingerbread replicas. Walnut and poppy seed are the most important ingredients for the cake called ”bejgli” (borrowed from German/Silesian diet), but fruitcakes fashioned after Austrian recepies are also in vogue. Drinks are also special, for adults „hot wine” (forralt bor) is a must, for youngsters – especially in trades but more often than not for those in colleges and universities -, it is „krampampuli.” This latter is a German invention from the 18th century (Kramambuli, made originally from brandy and Juniper berry) but in Hungary any mixture of highly potent alchololic mixture will do. Nordic parallels are Swedish „Julmust”, or the Finnish ”glögg.”

Traditionally, Santa Claus (Mikulás) was a man of darkness, specifically he was an unseen persona of the night who was able to hide from ordinary people. Naturally, switching from night to day takes one of the mysteries out from Santa. Today he comes during the daylight, with plenty of noise, revely and accolades. To make his international rounds he – because unquestionably Santa is male -, is expeditious, airborne, and muted. Even with his scandalous or frightening Krampus – or its other masked variations – Santa is not, as he would be considered by some, deviant but a socially-sanctioned instructive moralizer. As Lévi-Strauss wrote both culture heroes remind us about the inevitability of death and the passing of time, but also about gifts, love and family harmony as Eric Wolf and Margaret Mead have proposed long ago. As Mead expressed it: „Learning about Santa Claus can help give children a sense of the difference between a “fact” — something you can take a picture of or make a tape recording of, something all those present can agree exists — and poetic truth, in which man’s feelings about the universe or his fellow men is expressed in a symbol” (Mead and Metraux, 1979). Santa Claus myth is also about the larger question that concerns trust, credulity and lies. Some scholars – including the philosopher Susanne Langer whose work I respect a lot – indeed suggest that the fostering the myth of Santa Claus is healthy for it assists children to learn about fantasy, imagination and artistic development. To paraphrase Langer: you cannot take Santa Claus out of the chimney (Langer, 1953: 401). Most people believe that the myth of Santa is harmless, and is good for kids in fostering imaginative or role-playing. It is, or so goes the argument, a lie but a positive one at that as Margaret Mead and Rhoda Metroux seemed to believe in their jointly published books (Mead and Metraux, 1978, 1979).

A brief discussion

From time to time, scholars are turning to Santa Claus and Christmas to investigate cultural meanings and variations attacked to these. Both are unique in

million metric tons in 2018. (Source: https://www.statista.com/statistics/249679/total-production-of-sugar-worldwide/, last accessed: 4 December 2018). The US, Germany and The Netherlands lead in sugar consumption: roughly 40 to 44 kg per person annually (the other developed countries follow: Ireland, Australia, Belgium, UK).

10 The German sweet is referred to as ”Mohnbeugel,” although Stollen and Lebkuchen are more in vogue these days. According to Hungarian folk belief ”walnut” (dió) is a potent remedy against evil and bad luck; ”poppysed” (mák) brings plenty, good luck and – for girls – suitors/husband in the new year.

11 Mead’s book is hard to find, related excerpts of it can be read on the website: https://www.brainpickings.org/2014/12/16/margaret-mead-santa-claus-myth-deception/ .
integrating historical, social and economic aspects especially by relating to special cultural experiences. Findings from these studies suggest that Santa Claus and Christmas are interpreted and utilized differently in societies, and, in turn, that their definitions are far ranging, making it challenging to compare results across studies (Miller, 1993, Whiteley, 2008).

Several anthropological issues are behind the Santa Claus complex worthy of further elaboration. In order to unpack the meaning of Santa Claus, three analytical concepts must be considered in addition to devout piety: family, gift-economy, and the mythic milieu. The first, and the most overarching, is the relationship and interaction between children, parents, relatives, neighborhood, age-grade communities, and, eventually, the state. Isn’t it strange, that a carnivalesque winter solstice holiday of former times, when rambunctious youth, dressed in rags to frighten others by creating noise and mayhem, has been fused with piety, love and tenderness as mainstays of family values. As Gary Cross argues the modern holiday has been tamed from their unruly origins mainly through a process of domestication, whereby the focus of the event has migrated from Lord of Misrule celebration to evoking and maintaining a sense of wondrous childhood innocence (Cross, 2004).

The second, most controversial, aspect is gift-giving. Whether small or large, provided by close relatives or distant friends on certain occasions, gift-giving is anchored to larger economic cycles of production, distribution and consumption. The global commercialization of Christmas holiday season cannot persist without the support of the church, and assistance by multinational conglomerations and the state, for such massive production and trade cannot take place without their full participation. Despite popular belief, furious holiday spending is not simply beneficial for the economy; it creates overspending and causes consumerist anxiety about buying and ’giving’ brand specific popular items (Otnes, Kyungseung, and Young, 1994). This study of children’s letters to Santa Claus in the United States finds that over half the requests were brand specific, with nearly 85 percent of the letters mentioning at least one brand name. Girls tended to have a wider range of brand requests than boys, who seemed to favor popular items. In Europe, a similar trend has been emerging.

The final aspect concerns myths, particular beliefs and specific religiosity balancing as they are on the fine line of rationality/irrationality axis. Those accepting scientific views concerning mythical beings – such as vampires or Santa Claus – as ridiculous most likely reject the element of the "sacred" or "half-belief" that are so profoundly interwoven in our daily existence. All these leave us with perhaps one of the most intriguing questions: how come that such a concoction of pagan, wild, and truly rambunctious winter solstice holiday tamed into a peaceful and loving consumerist Christian popular festivity has been undergoing constant renewal? How sordid disguised men, who caused havoc and freight among locals, were turned into mild and bizarre characters and presently into digital monstrosities? In some curious ways Santa appears primarily at the points of not only a superhuman transformative power but myriad of possibilities representing growth and change. Various cultural narratives of and about Santa Claus provide a fertile source of cultural reflection and critical reflexivity that leaves one affectionate and thoughtful yet compliant with cultural codes of flexibility, variance and creativity. Santa Claus, after all, is a coeval corpus mysticum – like Christ or Saints as Ernst Kantorowicz demonstrated earlier (1997) -, an universal phenomenon with no nominalistic essence of any of his given particulars. As archetypical figure of Christmas holiday season, Santa Claus remains out of the ordinary in order to succeed (Stronach and Hodkinson, 2011). While he is
the quintessential figure of consumerism, he is above it all. This dramatis personae cannot be criticized for blindness (bringing gifts to all), nor blamed for the mischievousness of his associates (Befana, Knecht Ruprecht, Krampus, Pere Fouttard, Zwarte Piet), nor for causing and maintaining social anxiety.

In closing I would argue that mainstream Christianity, largely intolerant of raucous behavior in general and of the seemingly disorderly activities of religious festivals and rituals in particular, views these elements as part of human abomination that will be defeated by penitence or wholehearted embracement of faith. On the contrary, popular religious believers, and those half-believers, are more ready to accept the topsy-turvy world of festivals and syncretic religious practices. They seem far more disposed to appropriate various historical and modern elements, including legends from Christian mythology by supplying additional components to augment and expand Santa Claus into a more recognizable world-figure.

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