

# THREE WINTER RITES

Introduction	3
1. Saint Nicolas	5
2. Silvesterklaüsen	9
3. Tschäggättä	13
Christian Mythology	17
The Wild Hunt	18
Etymology	19
Neighboring rituals	21
Synthesis	22
Conclusion	23
Bibliography	25

# Introduction



**W**hen observing the work of the French photograph Charles Fréger, in the photo book *Wilder Mann*, we discover that in rural areas throughout Europe, some old costumed rituals linked to the seasons are still performed. Many take the form of a procession, organized once a year in a village or in a region, at a precise moment. A few members of the community take the masked roles and the others assist to the parade or, one could say, endure it. The behavior of these costumed figures is as coded as their aspect. The interaction they have within their group and towards the "public" is a constitutive part of the identity of their character. The costumes are activated by these peculiar behaviors. Aspect, behavior and time of apparition are the three dimensions that define these figures.

Beyond the impressive costumes and their distinct features, what is the meaning of these particular gestures, repeated movements, at a certain time of the year? Mircea Eliade assumes that traditional rites are coming from "exemplar

acts" of "Supernatural Beings" *in illo tempore*, a mythical ancient time before the birth of "humanity" (of the given community), narrated in founding myths. These exemplar gestures would have to be reenacted by the collectivity in a precise and repeated manner, in the form of a ritual in order to maintain the structure and heritage of the community<sup>1</sup>. For Suzanne Chappaz-Wirthner a rite is a highlight in a collectivity's existence, a moment of rupture in the daily rhythm, marked by the ritualized irruption of the imaginary world into the daily life. This irruption would show the activity of the symbolic function with which the members of a community build their social reality<sup>2</sup>. In *La Voie des Masques*, Lévi-Strauss analyzes different figures of the rites of North American Native tribes. He assumes that a ritual (and the myths linked to it) can only be understood through comparisons, parallels and oppositions with other myths or rites of that tribe or of neighboring tribes. He also highlights that myths evolve and change faster than rituals, the latter being embedded in the reality as they are really enacted. We will see that in Europe too, myths evolved more than rituals. Thus we could say that these kind of gestures, as they are anchored in the reality and in the everyday life of a community, are more constitutive of it than the fluctuant myths; a coded behavior performed every year since "a very long time in the past" would be intrinsically linked to the identity of a collectivity. Contrastingly, Henri Rey-Flaud, in his essay *Le Charivari – Les rituels fondamentaux de la*

*sexualité*, chooses a psychoanalytic perspective to analyze some European rites and myths. He states that these should not be analyzed as series of signs or symbols that could be read like a coherent written text, but more as a content to be interpreted with the means of psychoanalysis, like a dream. Through this point of view, rites and myths would be the expression of the collective unconscious.

After these few introductory remarks, I can present the subject of this essay: the investigation of three winter rituals I witnessed in different places of Switzerland. The first one is the Saint Nicolas celebration in the city of Fribourg, on the 6th of December. The second one is the *Silvesterkläuse* ritual, the New Year's Eve celebration of the village of Urnäsch, in Appenzell. It takes place twice a year, on the 31st of December and on the 13th of January (New Year's Eve in the ancient Julian calendar). The last one is Fasnacht, where the masked *Tschäggättä* appear during the Carnival week in the Lötschental, a small and isolated valley of the Alps. The costumed figures surfacing in these three rituals will be described and commented, from the details of their costumes and masks to their peculiar behaviors. I will try to outline their possible relations and similarities, comparing their gestures, their aspect, their time of appearance and the etymology of their names. I will also unveil a possible ancient myth hiding behind them, while comparing them to a few other rituals performed in the neighboring areas (Germany, Austria).

1. Eliade, Mircea, *Aspects du Mythe et Le sacré et le profane*

2. Chappaz-Wirthner, Suzanne, *Le Turc, le Fol et le Dragon*, p. 54: «Toute fête constitue un temps fort dans la vie d'une collectivité, un moment de rupture dans le quotidien, un moment de joie et d'exubérance et marqué par l'irruption ritualisée de l'imaginaire dans le réel. Cette irruption traduit l'activité de la fonction symbolique grâce à laquelle les membres d'une collectivité construisent leur réalité sociale (Sahlins 1980, chap II) en élaborant à partir du réel perçu une série de représentations qui aboutissent à la production d'une image de l'identité collective.»

3. Classical history of religions (from the end of the 19th century to the 50's) always tried to show the underlying structures that are common to different religions and mythologies. Its researchers were looking for the primitive myth that would be the origin of all the different ones (for example the historical Frazer, in *Le Rameau d'Or*). This centralizing method, linking everything in an evolutionist point of view, without taking the specific contexts into consideration, was later challenged by ethnological investigation methods. As current contemporary ethnology claims, the myths and even more the rites of a community are to be understood through the history of their geographic setting and community, its social context, structures and struggles. Each ritual is specific in its form and meaning because of the distinct features of its place of origin. This approach to analyze rituals, focusing on the specificities of each rite and its local roots, is more linked to sociology and political studies than to history of religions. Suzanne Chappaz-Wirthner chooses this approach for her study of a particular carnival in Valais, presented in her essay *Le Turc, le Fol et le Dragon*. She shows the importance of having a deep historical and contemporary knowledge about the place where a ritual unfolds. Nevertheless, in the context of this small essay, it is impossible to study in depth the social, economic, and political history of Fribourg, Lötschental and Urnäsch. Consequently, I will not focus on the particularities of each site but will use a literary approach instead. I will favor the analysis of the common elements that can be found in the three rituals and their possible tracks in ancient myths.



This ritual takes place on the 6th of December, in Fribourg city, Switzerland. Saint Nicolas is the central figure of the group. He is wearing traditional bishop clothes: an alb covered by a short mantle, both white with golden trim, and a mitre in the same colors. He has a long white beard. If we take a closer look, we see that the performer is quite young and that the beard is fake. During the procession, he rides a donkey that carries two carts full of candy on his back. The other important figure is the *Père Fouettard* (bogeyman). There are eight of them, wearing black monk costumes. The hood sits on their long black hair, extending into a long black beard. The performers also look quite young and their faces are covered with black makeup. They carry a bundle of wooden branches in their hands. The rest of the procession is made of musicians and bearers of fire torches, wearing medieval clothes. I focus here on the two main figures, Saint Nicolas and the *Pères Fouettards*, as they build the core of the performance and as they are already showing, in their aspect, a reversed similarity.

At 5 p.m., Saint Nicolas' procession begins, starting from the highest public square of the old city center, coming out from the oldest high school, Collège Saint-Michel. It marches through some streets of the old city, surrounded by a dense crowd. It arrives at 6 p.m. at the cathedral (devoted to Saint Nicolas). The procession of the Saint is divided into four groups. In front of each one, costumed teenagers are parting

# 1. Saint Nicolas



# History

the crowd with a rope they carry in their hands to make place to the procession. Each group is led by two *Pères Fouettards*; in the first three, they are followed by costumed musicians. In the last, they are preceding Saint Nicolas, who arrives behind them and is acclaimed by the public. He and some "assistants" throw candies towards the cheering crowd.

In contrast with this "kind and generous" behavior, the *Pères Fouettards* are adopting a different attitude: without a smile, they keep a severe face while walking slowly. Sometimes, they threaten a member of the crowd with their bundle, as an answer to those who dare to shout something at them. The second part of the ritual happens when the procession reaches the cathedral, goal of the walk. The *Pères Fouettards*, still preceding Saint Nicolas, enter in the cathedral and appear on its external balcony. From up above, with their bundle, they threaten the crowd who screams aggressively until Saint Nicolas arrives and stands in front of the balcony. From there, the "Saint" gives a speech to the people assembled at the bottom of the cathedral and in the streets all around. He talks about the past year, in a mostly satirical manner, and also calls for peace and tolerance. Then, at the end of the speech, big red flames appear behind the "Saint", still on the balcony of the cathedral. He disappears, followed by the *Pères Fouettards*, under the applause of the people.

Here too, we can note the inverted behavior of the two figures, even if the lead belong to Saint Nicolas.



Fribourg  
6th December

**S**aint Nicolas is the protector of the city of Fribourg. Accordingly, the cathedral is devoted to him. Almost 30'000 people attend the celebration every year. According to some sources, it is the biggest crowd for this Saint in Europe. The person performing Saint Nicolas is chosen amongst the students of Fribourg's high school Saint-Michel; same for the *Pères Fouettards* as well as for the musicians, who are young members of the local fanfares.

Going back to the origin of the ritual, we find the legend of the Saint. In La Légende Dorée of Jacques de Voragine for example (a medieval hagiography, that was part of the Church's corpus during the Middle Ages), we learn that he was a bishop in Myre, in the region of Lycia, Anatolia (under the Eastern Roman Empire) and lived from 260 to 345. He distinguished himself with his generous attitude in the different episodes narrated. Other legends of unknown origin joined this story, as the one where he resurfaces three little children killed by a butcher. But, observing the actual ritual taking place in Fribourg (and some other surviving rituals towards Europe), how is it that it took this particular form? How did this Saint become this figure of a generous old man with a white beard, giving biscuits to children? From where do the characters of the *Pères Fouettards*, black monks and dark doubles of the Saint, punishing bad children, come from? And why is the whole rite enacted by teenagers?

At the end of the 19th century, Saint Nicolas became Santa Claus,

appearing on the 24th of December, the same day the Christ was born, flying in a magic cart to bring presents to children through their fireplace. While, in the English language, we still recognize the Saint in the figure of "Santa Claus", in French, the 6th of December Saint Nicolas with his bishop costume and 24th of December "Père Noël" (literally "father Christmas") in his red and white costume appear like two different figures. Apparently, the mix between the "Christian" Saint Nicolas myth and another myth, including a winter figure, double faced, giving to the good and punishing the bad, or flying in a magic cart, appearing in the fireplace, is still evolving.



Fribourg  
6th December

## 2. Silvester-klausens



This ritual is performed on the 31st of December and on the 13th of January in the villages of Appenzell. I observed the one happening in the village of Urnäsch. Here we have two different groups, in some way inverted in the aspect but similar in the behavior. The members of the first one, the "Wüeschte" (ugly) *Silvesterkläuse* wear costumes made of natural and organic materials, green or dried leaves, pieces of wood, straw, tree branches, dried herbs, and fur from wild deer, goat

or fox. Each one of them has a different costume, made with one or two organic elements. For example, in the pictures, one is covered only by wood, then another by fern, another by ivy and another one by fir and holly. The body is entirely covered by the vegetation. The legs are shaped with the same material. The stature of these characters is thick and massive. Their masks are made with papier-mâché, painted in flashy colors (white, red, green, blue, yellow, etc.), and decorated with real deer horns on the forehead and cow teeth in the mouth. The faces are decomposed, asymmetrical on purpose, and the eyes are made really small, looking like white marbles with a tiny round black spot in the middle. The *Wüeschte* bear huge cow bells (up to 30kg) attached to their belts or carry a leather harness with smaller bells on it. Some of them carry a wooden stick: it is the attribute of the leader of each group of *Wüeschte*.

The second group, the "Schöne" (beautiful) *Silvesterkläuse* can be male or female. They are dressed in traditional costumes of Appenzell, different for each sex. They wear humanoid masks, really simple, all similar; female masks often have a small flower fixed to the lips, as the male ones have a small beard. They bear huge constructions on their heads, models of idyllic Appenzell life scenes, made mostly with train model materials. These constructions are full of shiny ornaments (see pictures). The "men" carry two huge cowbells, suspended to their neck, one resting on their chest and one on their back. The "women" have a harness on, cov-

ered with smaller bells. They all wear gaiters on traditional trekking leather shoes.

At 5 a.m., the men who will perform the ritual gather with the village's population on the main square. They are not fully costumed. Suddenly, all the lights of the village are turned off and everybody has to remain silent for fifteen minutes. Then, lights are turned on again as the groups leave and go have breakfast together in the homes of the people hosting them. At 6 a.m., they put on their entire costumes and go wandering about in the streets of the village. Both "species" are behaving the same. In the village, we met different groups, from four to eight figures, some composed of *Wüeschte* and some of *Schöne* ("species" are separated). Each group follows a different itinerary. First, they begin in the front of their host's house, and then they move and stop in front of chosen houses of the village. They place themselves in a circle, facing each other, and sing a "natural" "yodel" without words for a few minutes, a type of song typical of Appenzell. Then, they jump around, creating a loud noise with their bells. They repeat these actions three times, alternating songs and noise, and then move to the next house. The owners of the house have to come out, listen to them and offer them alcoholic drinks (white wine, hot wine, strong local liquors, etc.) that they drink with a straw, directly under their masks. In some cases, the *Silvesterkläuse* received a bit of money (mostly from cafés, restaurants or shops). The singing groups hang around in the village until 12-14 p.m.

Urnäsch  
Appenzell  
31st December



### Three Winter Rites

I could collect information at the museum of traditions of Appenzell and also by asking people around. I learned that only men wear these costumes and perform the ritual, and that inside a group, the performers all have the same age on average. There are groups of children (10-12 years old), groups of teenagers or groups of mature men. They gather by friendship, choose the type of costume by "affinity" and do the ritual every year. The best singer of a group takes the lead during the ritual, whereas the ones that sing badly are rejected from the groups. It is considered a great honor if they stop in front of your house. They choose their friends' houses, other people's houses as well as restaurants. Sometimes it happens that they are not welcomed by the owner (he just does not get out of his house). Only the members of each group know the exact itinerary they will follow and the houses where they will stop. The songs are aimed at attracting the good spirits into the house in front of which they are performed and the noise of the bells is meant to frighten the bad spirits. This is why the ritual is performed, according to the inhabitants of the region. But when I asked a woman of Urnäsch why it has this particular form, or where it comes from, she answered that she did not know the age of this tradition or what influenced it. And when I asked what was the link with the Christian religion, she said that

# History

there was none, that it was a "laic" ritual.

On an informative flyer found in the museum, we discover that apparently, the rite should not have a pagan origin, since it was formerly performed by monks (in the 14th Century). It seems to be linked to Saint Nicolas rites. In the 15th century, the Church asked to cease the "carnavalesque" noise around Christmas and that is why the date changed for the 31st of December. The ritual grew stronger after the 2nd World War and in the 60's - 70's. The group of the *Schönenkläuse* would be the more ancient group. In the museum we can see the older costumes, simpler, although the models on the top of their head are still shiny, made with Christmas decorations. Women would create the costumes for their husbands or for their sons. Now, as an employee of the museum told me (her husband was a *Schönenklaus* for forty years), the fabrication of the costumes costs near a thousand euros. Indeed, they have to sew the entire traditional costumes with the appropriate fabric and build the whole models for the top-head structures, which takes time and money. Nowadays, these are even sometimes decorated with LED lights.

Similarly to the Saint Nicolas, we also have here a ritual where two inverted or opposed figures are appearing at the end of the year, revealing a duality in the characters of winter rites. The third example that I will describe in the following paragraphs has no "double", but some similarities in the characteristics of the figures could bring light on the preceding cases.



**Urnäsch  
Appenzell  
31st December**



**T**he *Tschäggättä* appear in the Lötschental valley (Alps) during the carnival week in February. The costume of these frightening masked figures is made of fur (mostly goat, or sheep), black and/or white, falling over the knees. They are massive. Indeed, they broaden their shoulders with big and thick pillows, fixed horizontally on the top of their back and then covered up by fur.

### 3. Fasnacht - *Tschäggättä*

Under the fur, we distinguish what seems to be an old pajama (on some cases we see the stripes or the squares prints of the fabric). The pants are made of hessian, or sometimes are simply jeans. The shoes are mostly old trekking boots, covered with leather gaiters. The hands are covered with wool gloves, inverted. They wear a huge and heavy cowbell attached to a large leather belt. All the *Tschäggättä* carry a wooden stick, sometimes decorated, or other whipping accessories: a flail, a whip or a carpet swatter. The mask is the most stunning element of their costume. It is made of wood and painted in most of the cases. It is decorated with animal hair and real cow teeth can be used for the mouth. Sometimes, metallic pieces looking like piercings are fixed on their faces. The features of their face are exaggerated and symmetry is avoided, as most of the masks represent a skull, some kind demon or a witch.

The *Tschäggättä* appear in small groups, during an entire week, hanging around in the streets of the four villages of the valley. On the night of the "Fat Thursday" and during the following Saturday afternoon of this particular week, they walk in procession from the highest to the lowest village. They walk, run or jump in a weird way, making their bell ring. They are led by two shepherds. They attack the non-costumed people forming the "public", the villagers or the tourists. They catch them, take them with them while they walk on for a few meters and give them weird forced hugs or rub their face with snow.





# History

the rituals are always described as being there for as long as the community existed.

At the beginning of the 20th century, the progress of the Industrial Revolution allowed to build all-weather roads to the Lötschental. Indeed, this valley was formerly isolated from the outside world by the snow, during one half of the year. At the time the valley opened to the world, as ethnologists from all around the world came to study this environment, the particular carnival almost disappeared. The local priest, aware of the richness of this tradition and of its potential for the development of the valley, encouraged the inhabitants to continue the *Tschäggättä* to attract tourists and visitors. The isolated situation of the Lötschental could explain why the form of the carnival is particular there. But, as contemporary ethnologists claim, we cannot say that it is a "primitive" form of carnival, as it existed and evolved during the same amount of time than the others. However, we can still underline that the isolated situation could allow a different evolution, less influenced by the "external" world. From what we can grasp of the tradition before the industrialization of the valley, we learn that the masks were worn by young men. The nights of the *Fasnacht* were "their" nights, and to show their reign, they frightened and forced the rest of the population to stay into their homes. They were also assaulting this one house in the village, where all the young women were reunited, sewing. They chased the young women and covered their faces with soot. Their behavior was unpredictable

and quite violent. As tourists are now melted with the population, *Tschäggättä* were asked by the authorities to behave more "kindly". A procession was organized on the Saturday in the 60s, as well as a show for the families. But in the 80s, the *Tschäggättä* were missing their savage behavior and thus organized a wild parade during the night of the "Fat Thursday". This night procession, first condemned by the authorities, then accepted, became until today a part of the celebration of the official carnival. This shows the tension between the original wild and "out of borders" behavior of the *Tschäggättä* and its recuperation by the authorities as a touristic attraction, who try to maintain the tradition in a frame, for the tourists.

Before only for young men, the *Tschäggättä* costumes are now worn by older men, women, children and a few tourists who want to try the "adventure". The observation reveals that the masks were less frightening in the past than nowadays. As the behavior of the wild men became more "domesticated", their masks became more frightening, as if to balance the loss of their wildness. A few craftsmen in the valley are still creating the *Tschäggättä* masks. However, they have different opinions on how they should look like. Some think that the masks should look as they "always" have looked traditionally. Others are inspired by horror or science fiction movies and create new forms, defending the evolution triggered by the contact with the outside world, and positioning themselves against the petrification of the fest.

**A**s I was asking a few questions to a woman sculptor, making masks in the valley, about the origins of the *Tschäggättä* ritual, she told me that "the *Tschäggättä* are as old as the Lonza" (the Lonza is the river crossing the valley). We can see that



In the previous paragraphs, we described three cases. These rituals, despite a lot of differences, share interesting similarities. If we analyze the behavior of the "wild" figures that appear in each one of them, we see that they all have an active role towards the "public". As *Pères Fouettards* and *Tschäggättä* show a frightening and threatening attitude with their whipping accessories, the *Wüeschtekläuse* ask for alcohol and money in exchange for their performance. Furthermore, we can stress that the *Wüeschtekläuse* and the *Tschäggättä* are both shaking their bells while dancing wildly, wearing masked costumes reflecting their role of wild creatures. Moreover, *Pères Fouettards* and *Wüeschtekläuse* share their status of double: they both form a duality with a "good", "civilized" figure. *Pères Fouettards* (and the entire procession of Saint Nicolas) are played by teenagers exclusively, as were the *Tschäggättä* less than a hundred years ago, only by men. *Silvesterkläuse* are enacted by people of all ages, but exclusively by men as well. Where could these similarities come from? These communities are geographically not so far from one another, despite the natural obstacles between them such as mountains. Contact and exchanges surely took place in the area between the villages and communities.

Would they share the same myths, a bit distorted? From which myths could these common and yet different behaviors come from, everywhere claimed as very ancient? Why are they still performed?

**Lötschental**  
**13th February**

5. «Après de longues réflexions, j'ai statué sur le cas des Angles: que les temples des idoles ne doivent absolument pas être détruits dans cette nation, mais que l'on détruisse uniquement les idoles qui s'y trouvent. Qu'on prenne de l'eau bénite et que l'on asperge ces temples, qu'on y édifie des autels et qu'on y place des reliques; en effet, si ces temples sont bien construits, il est nécessaire et il suffit d'en changer la destination: les faire passer du culte des idoles à la louange du vrai dieu. De cette façon, le peuple, constatant que ses temples sont respectés, déposera plus facilement l'erreur de son cœur et, connaissant et adorant le vrai dieu, se rassemblera plus facilement aux lieux où il avait coutume de se rendre. Comme la coutume existe d'offrir beaucoup de boeufs en sacrifice aux esprits, il faut également transformer légèrement le cérémonial de ces offrandes, de manière à fixer ces coutumes rituelles au jour de la dédicace ou de la fête des saints martyrs dont les reliques ont été placées dans l'église; que les gens continuent à se construire des cabanes de branches auprès des mêmes temples devenus églises et qu'ils célèbrent la fête par des agapes rituelles.» Letter from the pope Gregory to Saint Augustine of Canterbury, 8th century

6. Walter, Philippe, *Mythologie chrétienne*, 2011

7. Rey-Flaud, Henri, *Le Charivari – Les rituels fondamentaux de la sexualité*, 1985, p.127

8. Chappaz-Wirthner, Suzanne, *Le Turc, le Fol et le Dragon*, 1995

9. Rey Flaud, Henri, *idem*, p.141

# Christian Mythology

the only given explanation, although this particular story does not mention the *Père Fouettard*. In the three rural regions where these rituals come from, people have been deeply catholic for more than a thousand years. Saying that the rituals they re-enact each year are pagan is almost an insult for them; although the only explanation they give is that "they always did it this way, since a very ancient time". Asking if the ritual is pagan or Christian might not be the right question.

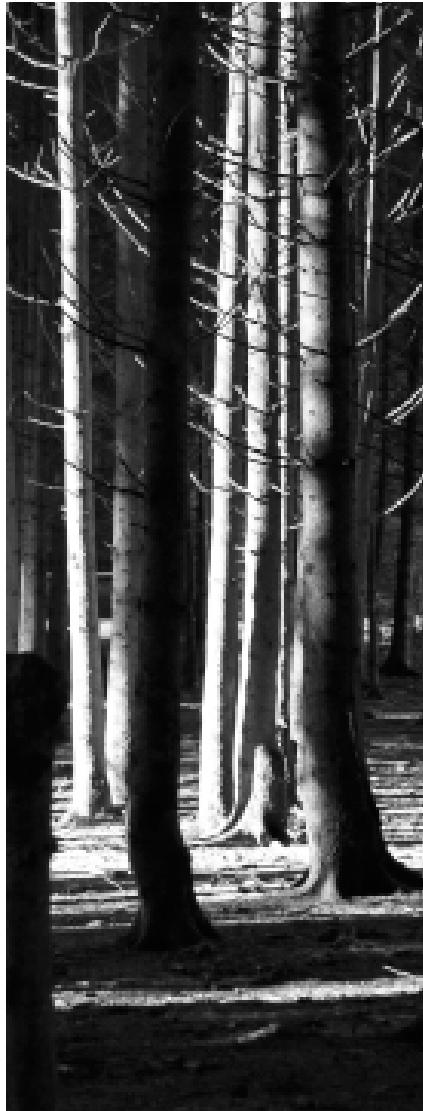
In his essay *Mythologie chrétienne*, Philippe Walter (a medieval literature researcher) explains that during the christianization of Western Europe, specific advice was given to priests who were sent to complete the difficult task of evangelizing the pagan communities. For example, he mentions a letter from the pope Gregory to Saint Augustine of Canterbury (beginning of the 8th century), where the pope actually suggests not to destroy the pagan temples but instead, to replace its idols by relics of Saints. Similarly, for ceremonies, he recommends to adapt the sacrifice practices, not to abolish them but just to change their recipient. If a bull is killed in the honor of some divinity, it should be offered to a Saint martyr instead. Moreover, the priest should take the place of the druid in the leading of these ceremonies. As we see, myths were slightly changed, but rituals in themselves, in their actual gestures, were not modified<sup>5</sup>. Furthermore, reading the legends of the Saints as they were written by Jacques de Voragine in *La Légende Dorée* (from 1261 to 1266),

Philippe Walter and other researchers show that these stories are full of Celtic patterns. A lot of these Saints life-stories are in fact Celtic myths. Obviously, in the early christianization of Europe, Christianity arrived as a thin veil, covering almost transparently ancient Indo-European religions that were there before, creating a European Christian mythology with particular rites, really far from the "orthodox" Middle Eastern Church.

In the late Middle Ages and in the Renaissance however, the wild rituals still celebrated and the strange stories still narrated were condemned by the authorities of the Church. For example, in the middle of the 13th century, William of Waddington wrote an anathema against the clerks of the English church described as "playing, masked, in the churches and running in the streets and in the cemetery in the afternoon"<sup>6</sup>. Claude Gaignebet, in *Le Carnaval*, also reports condemnation in the medieval period against the feast of "inversion", "Fest of Fools", organized by young clerks<sup>7</sup>. Likewise, Suzanne Chappaz-Wirthner mentions similar inverted rituals played by young clerks in Basel<sup>8</sup>. All those rituals took place around Christmas.

Henri Rey-Flaud reveals that, at the beginning of the 15th century, reports were made about brotherhoods of young men, in Zurich and Basel, costumed as "goats" or "devils" and plundering the cities during the nights of Christmas and New Year's Eve. Around the same time, teenagers groups were reported in Appenzell, "dressed as women, agitating bells and asking for the same privileges"<sup>9</sup>.

# The Wild Hunt



To understand the origins of these behaviors and rituals, we realize that we cannot investigate the orthodox Christian corpus. But an ancient European legend, present in most of regions in Western Europe, offers an interesting trail of investigation.

From time to time, in the winter and during the night, an unknown body of beings was heard in the sky or on earth. In deserted forests or fields, one could meet a group of soldiers and riders, demons, fairies or damned souls (depending on the version of the story), doing a horrible "hellish" noise. This myth, or legend, is known in the whole Europe but it is impossible to date back the first writings or testimonies describing it. It is generally called the Wild Hunt. It is attested everywhere in the entire Indo-European area, in more than a thousand versions, depending on the region or on the period, melting so many influences together, from Christianity to diverse ancient pagan religions (Celtic, Germanic, Scandinavian, etc.)<sup>10</sup>. The Wild Hunt is subject to a lot of controversy amongst the researchers of various fields (ethnology, medieval literary studies, folkloric studies, etc.). This "troop" appeared especially during the twelve nights (from the 25th of December to the 6th of January) – the longest nights where the sun reaches its lowest point and is apparently stopped, waiting for a new time to come. The Wild Hunt is often depicted to be led by a strong figure, a divinity – for example the Scandinavian god Odin, the Roman goddess Diana, the "Christian"

Devil, the Celtic King Arthur, the character Hellequin (Harlequin), and a lot of less known figures of diverse origins. Sometimes, leading a feminine troop, we find mysterious divinities or fairies like Holda, Perchta, Satia, or Dame Abonde<sup>11</sup>. Sometimes, a flying cart is also depicted as an element of the Wild Hunt, full of damned souls and the leader wears a sack to capture them. These elements are interesting to highlight, because they are attributes of our modern Santa Claus. The frightening elements would have been inverted, giving to the myth a positive aspect.

In the description of the "Maisnie Hellequin" written by Orderic Vital (1092), different parts of the parade are abundantly described. The Lord of the Other World appears to a modest priest, followed by his horde of dead and is depicted as a bearded giant, wearing animal furs and a huge mace. The horde, composed by black monks, soldiers and prostitutes, screaming and crying, are whipped by small devils. It is an ambulant Purgatory. This Christian version reveals the "educational" subversion of the myth operated by the Church. The elements to underline are, first, the presence of the "black monks", depicted in many different versions of the legend, second, the action of whipping the sinner souls and third, the depiction of the leader, showing all the attributes of the "wild man". We could do a link with the frightening behavior of the "Tschäggättä" or of the "Pères Fouettards"; the latter are traditionally appearing to punish the children that behaved badly.

# Etymology

Serbia, for example, a ritual exists where young men whip women to stimulate their fertility in the springtime<sup>13</sup>. Here we see a second function to the bundle, probably more ancient: a fertilization function. This brings us back to the *Tschäggättä*, all armed with sticks and whips, that were chasing young women of their village.

The etymology of the figures of the Lötschental is more difficult to approach, as it is in local dialect (as is the word of *Silvesterkläuse*). Indeed, Swiss German is not a written language and thus changes from place to place. Henri Rey-Flaud, taking his information from the research of Jean-Jacques Mourreau, says that, in older times, these Lötschental figures were called *Roitscheggetten*, meaning "the ones that are spotted with soot". The close resemblance between *Roitscheggetten* and *Tschäggättä* gives the beginning of the etymologic explanation. I asked a native Swiss German speaker about it and she told me that in German *Scheiken* is used to designate the spotted fur of an animal, like "pinto" for horses. In Swiss German, *tschäggättä* could imply an action, could mean "spotting around", "an activity involving the action of spotting". The *Tschäggättä* are wearing black and white goat furs. This could explain why they are called "spotted". But, as explained earlier in this essay, Henri Rey-Flaud found in his investigations that those figures were covering (spotting?) the faces of the women of the village with manure<sup>14</sup>. Like for the "Père Fouettard", we see the function appearing in the name.

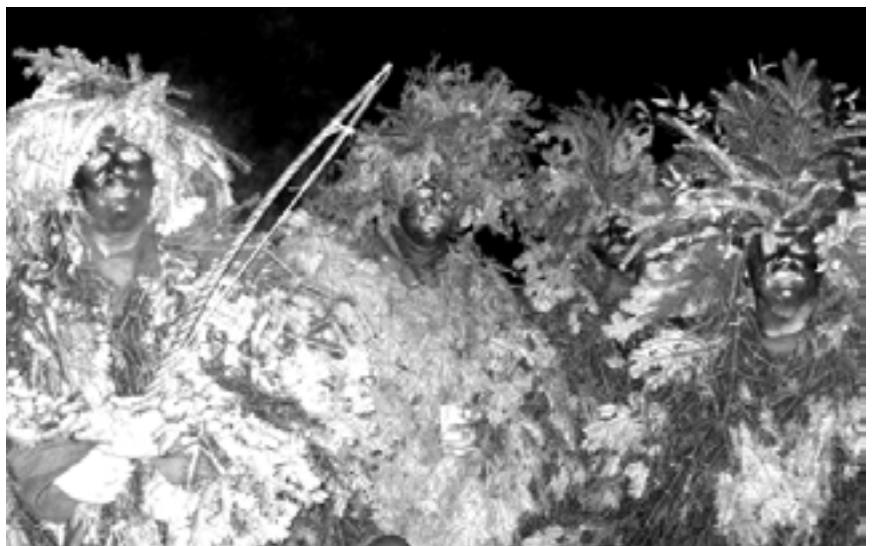




Krampus and Saint Nicolas  
Munich, Germany



Schöneperchten and Vogelperchten  
Austrian Alps



Sauvages  
Noirmont, Jura  
Switzerland

# Neighboring rituals

the *Wüeschekläuse* and the *Tschäggättä*. The “good” *Vogelpercht* or *Schönepercht* have a similar aspect (and a similar name) to the *Schönekläuse*. The explanation of their existence is also lost. Their origin and the etymology of their name is subject to debate (one explanation links it to “berchttac”/ “berchtnacht”, the medieval German word to designate the Epiphany day). Henri Rey-Flaud underlines the close linguistic link between *Perchten* and *Perchta*, the mysterious goddess presented in many legends as the leader of the Wild Hunt. Thus, in two similar rituals, Austrian and Appenzeller, the name of the figures have different etymological origins. If the former, they are related to the name of a leader of the Wild Hunt, and in the latter to the one of Saint Nicolas. This is one more element to add to our hypothesis that Saint Nicolas would be an avatar of the “Wild Man”, double-faced figure presiding the end of the year.

There are interesting parallels to draw with three other rituals performed in neighboring regions, in Germany, Austria and the French speaking part of Switzerland. The *Krampus* are a group of demonic figures appearing as bogeymen, next to Saint Nicolas, the 6th of December, in a ritual still performed nowadays in Bavaria. Wearing a demonic goat mask with giant horns, they frighten the children<sup>15</sup>. Their costumes and behavior closely resemble those of the *Tschäggättä* (that appear, as we know, at carnival). These two different characters are obviously cousins in some way.

In the Austrian Alps, near Salzburg, similar figures appear also from the end of December to the end of January, the *Perchten*. The “bad” *Schiechperchten* are amazingly identical to the *Krampus*,

The last example I will cite here are the *Sauvages*, figures appearing in a ritual on the fifth of February in Noirmont, Jura. The *Sauvages* (savages, wilds) have a costume and a hat made of pine branches, similar to the *Wüeschekläuse*, whereas their face is covered with black make-up, like those of the *Pères Fouettards*. They are agitating cow bells and are screaming loudly. Only men perform this ritual; they chase women, cover their face with soot, whip them and throw them in the village’s fountain<sup>16</sup>. All these similarities with our three cases will help to draw a common structure for these rituals.



Schiechperchten  
Salzburg, Austria

15. Eddy, Melissa, web video reportage for the New York Times: <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/12/22/world/europe/krampus-he-sees-you-when-youre-sleeping-and-gives-you-nightmares.html?emc=eta1&.r=0>

16. Couleurs Locales, TV reportage for the RTS: <http://www.rts.ch/pages-speciales/moments-forts/6521158-nous-les-attraperons-nous-les-fouetterons.html>

# Synthesis

Gathering all the information displayed in this essay, a common structure of the winter ritual can be drawn: around the end of the year, when the sun is close to its lowest point (around the twelve nights), groups of young men dress up as "wild men" behave wildly and make a lot of noise. They either attack and whip women or punish sinners. Sometimes a "good" figure is in balance with them.

Three important dimensions appear in the three observed rituals. First, there is the dimension of fertility and wealth: men are chasing women and playing symbolical fertilization acts; a good figure (Saint Nicolas) is spreading abundance on the community; *Silvesterkläuse* are chasing bad spirits away. The second dimension is the primitive justice: the good behaviors are rewarded whereas the bad are punished through the symbolical action of the double-faced figure of Saint Nicolas/bogeyman. The third is the relation of the community towards their dead. The pagan belief that the souls of the dead are numerous to prowl during the winter nights, around the homes of the living, is reported throughout Europe<sup>18</sup>. All the dead of the year would be stuck on earth until a cosmic moment between New Year's Eve and Easter, when they would depart all at the same time<sup>19</sup>. A psychopomp leader would gather them and allow them to go to their next destination. The relationship with the dead takes many forms, due to the many mixed mythological influences. For example, fear about the "bad" dead that can kidnap the living is reflected in

the ritual of the noise created to chase them away. Also, Fairies Feasts were offered to dead siblings that would come for a last visit around Christmas night. We can also cite the recuperation of these beliefs by the Christian Church, transforming them in wandering or sinner souls<sup>20</sup>.

Do the figures of our rituals represent the dead, or the wild "other" (in psychoanalysis the "It" inside all of us)? Are they creatures of the other world symbolizing the "It" of the community? Their role can certainly not be reduced to one of these interpretations, as they are a complex construction, which slightly varies from one approach to another. As Mircea Eliade underlines, the irruption of the Chaos in the Order of the community permits to renew the Order, to avoid its decay and corruption<sup>21</sup>. All these rituals, each in a different way, are marking the end, the death of the old year and the birth of the new. Some kind of primitive justice is executed and fertility is spread to permit the renewal of the community. Sins are punished and cleaned, as the new generation is assured by the symbolical fertilization.

A lot of other elements are included in these ritual practices, such as the fact that teenagers are performing the rituals. Lévi-Strauss and Eliade argue that they are in a liminal state, between childhood and adult age. They are not totally part of the community because "non-initiated"<sup>22</sup>. They would be then the most apt to play the "Others", or the dead, because of their outsider situation regarding the "initiated" adult collectivity and of their

state of metamorphosis. The aspects of music and noise are also interesting. It would frighten the bad spirits and chase away the wandering souls from living areas. New Year's firecrackers could be a remainder of this primitive noise. On the contrary, music and songs could help guide and gather the dead souls of the year for them to leave. Generally, the noise marks the irruption of Chaos and inversion. The *Silvesterkläuse* show the duality, they oppose the roar of the bells to the melodic songs. Saint Nicolas procession is followed by musicians, whereas the *Tschäggättä* produce noise only from their bells. We go back to our displayed duality, symbolically performed. Wilderness and civilization, good and bad, darkness and light, black and white, chaos and harmony are standing facing each other, in a symbolical fight that reveals that they are a part of the same whole.

A huge amount of beliefs and myths of diverse origins are nourishing the rituals that we still see nowadays, mixed with the peculiar social and religious history of each community where they take place. Each is particular, although each is built with common elements standing in opposition. Myths are partly forgotten, but the rituals are constitutive of the identity of the community and ensuring its survival, as its primitive laws and its regeneration are warranted through their symbolical reenactment.

The repetition of these rituals is based the cosmic cycle, as they are performed again and again following the rhythm of the sun; in our case in the key

# Conclusion

moment of the year of its temporary disappearance. The need for human communities to copy the rhythm of the seasons as a model to organize their rites (re-ligio means link – it gives the community its structure) is revealing their anxiety towards death. But in a cyclic time model, death means renewal. Reenacting what happens in nature (seasons) under the cosmic influences ensures for the community that itself will follow the same cycle, where renewal is certain and definitive death is conjured. This follows the ancient philosophical and mystical idea of microcosm and macrocosm. Hence, we can see why rituals are so important, and still performed year after year: they allow the human communities to survive, to live, to exist.

in almost closed categories, independent from each other. Bruno Latour suggests to use the tools developed by anthropology towards "other" societies to analyze our own; we are not so different from the "others" in the way we developed our own collective structure. For example, our modern experimental science is really close to our judicial system: in laboratory experiments, results and proofs are made in the closed and protected space of the laboratory, in front of a few "honest" witnesses; then they can testify to the rest of the community that the result of their experiment is "true". Modern laboratory is in fact working like a tribunal<sup>23</sup>. From this point of view, analyzing the myths and rites of our collectivity (that are coming, as we could see, from a complex mix of religions, melting Christian heritage with a deep "pagan" background) is interesting not only from the point of view of myth studies, but also because it can bring a better understanding of the whole structure of our western society. As Henri Rey-Flaud could say, we investigate its collective unconscious.

The study conducted by Lévi-Strauss in *La Voie des Masques* on a few Native American tribes myths and rituals, where he shows that there is no "original" myth or rituals but a kaleidoscope of different practices, sharing common elements, sometimes opposed, but too with specific particularities, seems valid when we analyze the rites surviving in Europe. From this point of view, we not only notice that those tribes were not more primitive than us in their social structures, but also that the ritualistic phenomenon, as an intrinsic part of each collectivity, is present in every human society. When humans gather as a community they need to be linked with common laws, common origin myths and repetitive rituals that structure their social interactions and by this way their identity as a community. In the small European collectivities like mountain villages, this phenomenon, as observed in this essay, is still visible. It would surely be interesting to investigate how these dynamics are evolving in big cities.

Lévi-Strauss also demonstrated that myths, rituals and objects are inextricably linked in a common mechanism<sup>24</sup>, and Ernst Gombrisch, in *Histoire de l'art*, makes the hypothesis that the Paleolithic cave paintings (of Lascaux for example) were surely used within a shamanic hunting ritual<sup>25</sup>. It seems that the first forms of art were born from a religious context: painting (icons), sculpture (idols), poetry (mythology). And from rituals also came theater, dance, music, etc. Artists enrich and transform myths and rituals through time<sup>26</sup>, they have an essential role in the development and metamorphosis of the human culture. If we go back to our winter rituals, observing costumes and behaviors, we assist to particular plastic creations and performances. In these ritual we distinguish a "natural" form of art, born from the essential need of the human community, the anxiety towards death and void. My interest as an artist to observe the mechanism of these rituals is to understand my own culture, as well as to discern the origin of art and its aim.

18. Gaignebet, Claude, *Le Carnaval*

19. idem

20. Ginzburg ,Carlo, *Le Sabbat des sorcières*

21. Eliade, Mircea, *Aspects du Mythe and Le sacré et le profane*

22. Lévi-Strauss, Claude, *Chap.1 Le père noël supplicié*, in *Nous sommes tous des cannibales*

23. Latour, Bruno, *Nous n'avons jamais été modernes – Essai d'anthropologie symétrique*

24. Lévi-Strauss, Claude, *The Way of Masks*

25. Gombrich, Ernst, *Histoire de l'art*, p. 40

26. Eliade, Mircea, *Aspects du Mythe and Le sacré et le profane*



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**26 Three  
Winter  
Rites**

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