

When Santa was a Mushroom: *Amanita muscaria* and the Origins of Christmas
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A couple of years ago, I was home on break from university, going through a book of old Christmas carols my family sings every year. On a whim, I stopped at a carol we normally skipped, but whose melody I had always liked: "The Holly and the Ivy":

*"The holly and the ivy
When they are both full grown
Of all the trees that are in the wood
The holly bears the crown."*

Our family Christmas celebrations generally have little to do with the Christian spin on the holiday; in past years we'd skipped singing "The Holly and the Ivy" because its verses have a distinctly religious cast. As an adult, I realized that those Christian verses were probably added on much later, masking the verses where the ivy was celebrated in soft counterpart to the bristly holly. I rewrote the song in true pagan fashion, and it's been part of our Christmas canon ever since. Yet that insight got me thinking: how many seemingly Christian elements of Christmas actually mask pagan or shamanic traditions that are much older?

The idea that Christmas has been grafted onto much older shamanic beliefs is not a new idea, of course. Other scholars have pointed out the parallels between our Christmas feasts, gift giving, and sexual permissiveness (just look at the modern Christmas office party), and older traditions such as the pagan feast of Saturnalia (Letcher 2007, Renterghem 1995). In this article, I would like to advance a newer synthesis between traditional European shamanism and the Christmas holiday as it is celebrated today. Mostly without knowing it, Westerners still celebrate Christmas using symbols that have shamanic significance: none more so than the humble *Amanita* mushroom, a psychoactive fungus that may be rooted in the very origins of Christmas itself.



A Christmas card featuring a gift of *Amanita* mushrooms.

Amanita is a genus of mushroom native to temperate regions of Europe and North America, as far south as Florida and as far north as Siberia in eastern Russia (Erowid 2007). The *Amanita* genus is one of the most widespread in the world, with species that range from edible to deadly poisonous. Two species, *Amanita muscaria* and *Amanita pantherina*, contain muscimol and ibotenic acid and are known to be psychoactive (Erowid 2007). *Amanita* mushrooms grow in association with the roots of pine, birch and sometimes oak trees and would have been widespread in Europe and Russia (Arthur n.d.). The effects of eating dry or fresh psychoactive *Amanita* mushrooms include euphoria, a sense of inebriation, impaired balance, and increased clarity of thought. Negative effects such as chills, sweating, salivation, nausea and vomiting can also manifest, and are more likely to occur when *Amanitas* are eaten fresh. Drying or boiling *Amanita* mushrooms converts the reactive ibotenic acid to muscimol, and may boil off the muscarine that is thought to be at the root of these negative effects (Erowid 2007).

The epicenter of traditional *Amanita* use has been in Siberia, a part of eastern Russia thousands of miles from Moscow and as different from European Russia as colonial India was from the British Isles. Siberia was host to dozens of distinct ethnic groups, many of whom have retained their identities and shamanic practices into the present day. Siberian shamans or medicine people are individuals who serve the community by contacting the spirit realm in order to heal illness or divine the future (Letcher 2007). Sometimes, a shaman ingests dried *Amanitas* as a means of access to these realms. However, many shamans have told ethnographers that they themselves are too powerful to need *Amanitas*, and entered the spirit realms through methods such as drumming or ecstatic chanting alone (Letcher 2007).

Furthermore, it wasn't just Siberian shamans who used *Amanitas* during the long arctic winters. A closer look at the literature reveals that *Amanitas* may have been more heavily used by lay people than by shamans: numerous Russian travelogues describe *Amanita* mushrooms being passed out as a libation at celebrations held by high-ranking Siberian tribespeople, just as alcoholic drinks are consumed in the West (Letcher 2007). At low doses, *Amanita* mushrooms can produce a sensation of warmth and increased energy similar to a moderate dose of alcohol but more stimulating. It's logical to suppose that in Siberia they might have been eaten recreationally to brighten spirits during the dark winter (Rutajit 2000).



The woods at dusk near Tyumen, Western Siberia. The sun would have stayed near or below the horizon for weeks during the Siberian winters

Ordinary Siberians may also have used Amanitas to ward off or combat winter-related conditions such as vitamin D deficiency, depression, and lack of energy brought on by seasonal affective disorder (SAD). Edible species such as oyster mushrooms are a little known but important source of vitamin D, which is essential for maintaining a level mood and bolstering energy levels. It is not far-fetched to suppose that Amanita mushrooms would have been an important source of vitamin D for Siberians during the sunless months of winter (Rutajit 2000). Ethnographic evidence also suggests that Siberian laborers would take a small amount of Amanita mushrooms before beginning physical work, to take advantage of the burst of energy and mild euphoria produced at that low dose (Letcher 2007, Rutajit 2000). This practice is similar to the way kratom leaves are traditionally used by Thai laborers, and underscores the practical functions that Amanita mushrooms likely carried for ordinary Siberians.

Amanita mushrooms: The original Christmas gift? Though Amanita mushrooms had a recognized recreational and practical value in Siberia, the connection between the red and white toadstool and the Christmas holiday is less clear. What can the local practices of tribes in Siberia tell us about why we exchange gifts around solstice time, stash them under pine trees decorated with red and white ornaments (which are sometimes even in the shape of amanitas!), and sing songs about flying reindeer?

Traditions often have a living quality about them: they evolve out of original forms to the point where we forget why we perform them in the ways we do. Most people can agree that Christmas is celebrated on December 25th because this date is close to the winter solstice, the shortest and darkest day of the year (Renterghem 1995). This must have been a momentous time of year for people living in far northern climes: around the arctic circle, the sun would have completely disappeared, plunging the world in darkness. In European pagan societies that used a lunar calendar, the winter solstice marked the end of the old year and ushered in Yule, a twilight time that was neither the old year nor the new. During this time, the boundaries between the earthly and spirit realms were thin (Renterghem 1995). Even in a supposedly modern, reason-based society, we still hold festivities to mark this time of transition before the new year.

Deep winter would have also been a time of physical and perhaps spiritual hardship for people in northern latitudes, due to the lack of sunlight. Chief among the duties of Siberian shamans was making the rounds to the tents of Siberian tribespeople and handing out "gifts" of dried Amanita mushrooms (Rutajit 2000). A dose of warming, energizing, and euphoric Amanitas may have been the best gift at that time that any Siberian native could ask for.

As discussed, fresh Amanitas can induce nausea, vomiting and other unpleasant effects that can be avoided by drying the mushroom (Erowid 2007). Siberian shamans gathering wild Amanitas may have placed crops on tree branches, strung them on strings, or placed them in wet stockings hung before the fire to dry (Arthur n.d., Rutajit 2000). The parallels are unmistakable between these Amanita-drying practices and surviving Christmas traditions such as hanging ornaments and garlands on trees and stockings before fireplaces. Furthermore, when visiting people's homes to perform healing services, shamans would often climb through the smoke hole of the tent, sometimes with a sack of Amanitas or other entheogenic plants to administer to the sick (Arthur n.d.).

Over time, the gift of health, energy and elevated mood provided by the Amanita mushroom may have morphed into a general myth of a figure who brought presents into the home at solstice-time. Long before American poet Clement Clark Moore wrote about Saint Nick coming down the chimney with a sackful of presents, a much older myth tells of a visiting goddess or shamaness who descends the chimney or smoke hole and places presents in stockings. This tale was known throughout northern Europe from England to Russia in medieval times (Rutajit 2000).

<https://youtu.be/JDh7W4oGxAs>

Was Santa Claus a Shaman? I hope the research above has led some of our readers to consider this possibility. We do know that the concept of Santa Claus as a magical figure who visits people around solstice-time is much older than the Christian Saint Nicholas (Letcher 2007). The most common version of Saint Nicholas is based on a Russian Orthodox bishop who showed extraordinary charity towards children and impoverished young women (Letcher 2007, Renterghem 1995). As Christianity's influence spread throughout Europe and suppressed (but did not eliminate) the old pagan religion, the figure of Saint Nicholas was laid overtop the original concept of the goddess, shamaness, or pagan deity who visited believers bearing gifts (Rutajit 2000, Renterghem 1995).

The Christianized version of Saint Nicholas was brought to America by Dutch colonists, whose legends about the saint magically visiting houses to deposit gifts in stockings (Letcher 2007, Renterghem 1995) bears strong resemblances to the scenario in Siberia. Furthermore, the Dutch version of Saint Nicholas was usually assisted by a gnome-like "Dark Helper", whom some scholars have speculated is the remnant of the original pagan deity associated with the solstice celebration (Renterghem 1995).

When the Dutch colony of New Amsterdam was captured by the English and renamed New York, Dutch Christmas customs were gradually forgotten (Letcher 2007), until Clement Clark Moore revived the Santa legend in his poem, *A Visit from Saint Nicholas*. Moore did a lot to cement the image of Santa Claus as "kindly old elf" who travels the world in a single night on a sleigh pulled by flying reindeer (Letcher 2007). In creating his classic image of Santa Claus, Moore drew on the folklore of northern European immigrants, who continued to tell stories of Saint Nicholas's midnight visits in his flying sleigh (Rutajit 2000). The connection between Moore's poem, European folklore, and the probable shamanic origins of the Santa figure are strengthened when one looks at the illustrations of Santa Claus that Thomas Nast created for the poem:

Thomas Nast's Santa Claus

A gnome-like version of Santa Claus drawn by Thomas Nast.

This squat, fur-covered gnome-like creature bears little resemblance to the tall, lean Russian bishop whom Santa Claus is supposedly based on. He does look curiously similar to the pagan forest deity Hearn/Pan, who may have been transformed into the Dark Helper character of the Santa myth (Renterghem 1995). He also credibly resembles a diminutive, fur-clothed shaman of the sort who might have lived in pre-Christian Europe.

The symbols that surround the Santa mythos also hint at connections to the Amanita mushroom. Santa Claus is said to place presents both in stockings (Rutajit 2000) and under the Christmas tree, traditionally a living pine tree (Renterghem 1995). As discussed, Siberians would often place Amanitas in stockings to dry before the fire. Furthermore, Amanita mushrooms are symbiotic with the roots of pine trees, and sometimes oak trees (Arthur n.d.). Even Santa's flying reindeer may be connected to the Amanita mushroom and its effects: reindeer have been observed foraging and eating Amanita mushrooms in winter, and sometimes exhibiting

“drunk” behavior afterward (Letcher 2007). Some scholars have speculated that Santa’s “flying reindeer” are a covert reference to the behavior of reindeer who have ingested Amanita mushrooms. It may even be that native Siberians first deduced the probable effects of Amanita mushrooms by observing intoxicated reindeer (Arthur n.d.).

Was Jesus Christ a Shaman? Today, Christmas is celebrated as the anniversary of the birth of Jesus Christ, even though most Biblical scholars admit that the actual date of Christ’s birth is unknown (Rutajit 2000). However, in a larger sense, the story of Jesus Christ also possesses shamanic elements. In the New Testament, Christ dies, remains in a limbo between life and death for three days, and is reborn as an enlightened and spiritually powerful being—literally the son of God revealed. This story closely parallels the classic shamanic initiation in which a shaman-in-training undergoes ego death—often with the aid of entheogens such as Amanita mushrooms—travels to the spirit realms, and returns to the earthly plane as a spiritually powerful shaman (Rutajit 2000). It is possible that the story of Christ’s death and rebirth was written to resemble a shamanic initiation rite in order to convince reluctant natives in pre-Christian Europe to convert to the Christianity (Rutajit 2000). Yet as we head into the Christmas season, it may be useful to contemplate whether the narrative reflects shamanic roots in Christianity itself—roots that have been eroded over time by religious politics and the tides of history.

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