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Autor: [s.n.]
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Schmutzli: the Samichlaus's sinister sidekick

Around this time of the year, a red-cloaked figure with a white woolly beard and sack of presents is paying calls on children across Switzerland.

This is not the Santa Claus known to English-speaking countries but the Swiss version – who is normally accompanied by a strange-looking individual with a blacked out face. The origins of this sinister companion are less clear than those of Samichlaus.

Known as Schmutzli in the German part of the country and Père Fouettard (from "whip") in French, Samichlaus's alter ego usually carries a broom of twigs for administering punishment to children whose behaviour throughout the year has not been up to scratch. Over the years though, and despite retaining his foreboding appearance, Schmutzli has evolved into a more benign figure. At the Samichlaus parade in Bern's old town on the last Saturday of November he helps hand out gifts of gingerbread and mandarins to the assembled hordes.



Samichlaus and Schmutzli accompanied by the donkey

There is evidence though that in more conservative parts of the country the traditional Schmutzli is still alive and well. Last year, Lucerne reported that at a St Nicholas gathering there, a group of teenage Schmutzlis started chasing some of the children. When they caught a boy, they thrashed him with a broomstick. Later they were roaming round the district, knocking their broomsticks on the buses to scare the children inside.

This St Nicholas custom in Switzerland became interwoven with a festival of noise and masks dating back to pre-Christian times. Schmutzli was a symbol of the evil spirits which these ancient festivals sought to drive out with a combination of noise and light. Winter processions involving loud noise and lanterns continue to this day in many parts of Switzerland.

An illustration from 1486 depicts a demon who abducts children. This child-stealing motif returns

again in Schmutzli. There's also the Sträggele, another child-stealing figure which is a native Swiss demon. Birch brooms are associated with the Sträggele – and that's also what Schmutzli carries.

The December 6 tradition was originally a form of "letting off steam" for groups of young men, an occasion for them to dress up and make a lot of noise. It was also about protecting their patch. Schmutzlis normally appeared in groups. That's because it was originally a custom observed by groups of boys who wanted to defend the local girls from boys from outside their village. Later the Catholic Church tried to "civilise" this rowdy custom by introducing the character of St Nicholas the bishop and by giving him one or several Schmutzlis as helpers and companions.

Until the Second World War Schmutzli was known only in Catholic areas – mainly in central and southern Switzerland. Schmutzli brings a touch of fear, which makes the whole thing more attractive. He provides a contrast with the figure of St Nicholas.

If globalisation means Samichlaus's position is threatened by the growing popularity of the North American Santa Claus, what will become of Schmutzli?

from swissinfo

Between ox and ass?

With no basis in the canonical narratives of the birth of Jesus, an ox and ass are usually part of the nativity scene. The tradition may arise from an

extracanonical text, the Pseudo-Matthew gospel of the eighth century:

"And on the third day after the birth of our Lord Jesus Christ,

Mary went out of the cave, and, entering a stable, placed the child in a manger, and an ox and an ass adored him. Then was fulfilled that which was said by the prophet Isaiah, 'The ox knows his owner, and the ass his master's crib.' "

The ox, the ass, and the infant Jesus are depicted in one of the earliest depictions of the nativity, on an ancient Roman Christian sarcophagus from the 4th century.

Considerable symbolism is attached to the ox and the ass. The ox traditionally represents patience, while the ass represents humility and readiness to serve.

from the internet