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## THE BUSINESS OF SANTA CLAUS IN LAPLAND

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### Where does Santa Claus live?

*“Father Christmas is worth millions of pounds to the country which successfully claims him as its own”*  
Sunday Telegraph 20.12.1992

Thirty years ago, hotels and restaurants in Rovaniemi closed through Christmas. A lot has happened since. This transformation represents a fascinating empirical opportunity to understand how people construct markets. Especially around a very specific character, believed or not.

This lecture looks at the creation of the Santa Claus industry in Lapland, Finland. It is based on an ongoing research project I am conducting. Some of its findings have been published already with my co-authors, Professor Katy Mason from Lancaster University, and Dr. Philip Roscoe from the University of St Andrews. Much of the lecture is, however, based on research data I have collected quite recently, and hence, some of the fresh stories shared in my presentation today may contain some understandable gaps. I am happy to answer questions and discuss points that were missing from the lecture at the end.

I am not here to prove that Finland is the home of Santa, but rather try to help us understand how this argument has been developed, situated, and materialized into an economically, physically, and socially significant industry in the remote, faraway northern part of Finland. I will not provide a historical account of Santa Claus as such, but rather, Santa’s claimed home in Finland.

The first Concorde flight from Britain to Northern Finland landed in 1984. Around 100 passengers wanted to experience the magic of Christmas in this authentic setting. I ask, how did this marketing success materialize, and how did Finland become the home of Christmas?

### Myth based market creation

A story is sold in the UK and increasingly elsewhere in the world too:

*“You hear the pitter-patter of excited feet as your sleigh pulls up to a small cabin in the woods. The air is crisp here, but a warm glow radiates from inside. The children creak open the door... there he is! His boots are dark and heavy, his jacket the deepest red they have seen, his long snow-white beard leads their eyes up to his jolly smile, which asks 'so what would you like for Christmas?’”*  
(Travel Agency advertising material).

This story is materialized into a physical marketplace in Lapland, Finland. Let’s see how this happens.

I will first look at the nature of myths. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, a myth is:

*“a traditional story, typically involving supernatural beings or forces, which embodies and provides an explanation, aetiology, or justification for something such as the early history of a society, a religious belief or ritual, or a natural phenomenon.”* Stories, including myths, are central not only in societies, but also in organisational life (see, e.g., Bowles, 1989, 1997): *“myths and fairy tales are retold and reused in popular culture, including the culture of management. What is more, popular culture shapes and influences everyday practices, including practices of organizing”* (Czarniawska, 2004, p.viii).



Christmas and the extraordinary myth of Santa Claus have enormous economic and social significance (Cluley, 2011; Hancock & Rehn, 2011). The Santa myth is used by businesses across the Western world to create an annual festival of shopping at a time of year when people expect to spend money (Thompson & Hickey, 1989; Miller, 1993). Santa Claus is an extraordinary and significant PR man. His image can be seen everywhere during the festive season used in advertising to boost sales and promote the seasonal spirit. Much economic activity also takes place behind such festive shopping scenes to experience Christmas. We want to see Santa in person too. So his home is recreated in Christmas grottoes, shopping malls, department stores, and winter theme parks, allowing children to meet him and plead for presents. People also travel quite long distances to meet the 'real Santa' in his faraway home.

The myth of Santa Claus provides an infrastructure to create and organise markets for such magical experiences: we expect to meet a jolly, white-bearded man with a red hat and suit; with reindeer, snow, and presents. This myth has been translated into an extraordinary market on a global scale and is performed by multiple market actors who work together to construct and organize a market for visitors to meet the real Santa Claus. The purpose of my research is to understand the construction and sustainable development of the Santa Claus Business in a remote part of the world: Lapland, Finland.

### **Context and methods**

Tourism, and Christmas tourism in particular is economically a significant industry in Lapland, Finland. As we will soon see, this market have much relied on customers travelling from the United Kingdom for a one day visit, and increasingly overnight stays, to meet Santa Claus. The rest of the world has found Lapland too. During the winter season last year (November-April) 1,996,367 overnight stays took place in Lapland of which 1,242,154 were by foreigners, and 273,128 by British (see <http://visitfinland.stat.fi/PXWeb/pxweb/en/VisitFinland>).

The city of Rovaniemi, also known as the capital of Lapland, is the main site of Christmas tourism in Finland, with the biggest airport and accommodation capacity. It has a Santa Claus Village as Santa's 'unique' meeting place, open all year. Other smaller scale locations in Lapland are varying-sized ski resorts (Kittilä, Luosto, Olos, Pyhäunturi, Saariselkä and Ylläs). Enontekiö, my hometown and a small, remote and sparsely-populated area about 300km north of Rovaniemi, is one of the most northern airport and Christmas tourism destination. My previous research looked at specifically the site of Enontekiö, whereas, at the moment, I am collecting data on Christmas tourism in Rovaniemi and Lapland more broadly.

My research uses a combination of qualitative data, including interviews with key actors involved in the operation of the Santa Claus industry both in the UK and Finland. They include travel agencies, tourism boards, regional councils, and businesses and entrepreneurs in the tourism industry. I have collected archival and documentation data about the market actors, market offerings (e.g. advertising materials, brochures), consumer reviews (e.g. blog posts, TripAdvisor reviews, news articles), and historical accounts of the market (e.g. interview transcripts, airport and tourism statistics, market research reports, newspaper archives). I worked as an elf myself in the Santa excursion industry for three years (2001–2003) and observed the functioning of the market in Lapland which provides a rich understanding of the industry.

### **The much-debated home of Farther Christmas**

*"Children who write each year to Father Christmas could be forgiven if they are now a little uncertain about where to send their letters. The precise location of Santa's workshop is the subject of a fierce dispute between Greenland, Finland, Sweden and Norway, who have each staked rival claims for millions of pounds in Santa tourism revenue."* Times, 20.12.1991

Santa's geographical origins and place of residence have long been debated. Alaska, Greenland, Sweden, Norway, Turkey and Finland all have had a case to make. In 1975 Scotland took part in this competition and made a claim for the home of Santa Claus founded in Aviemore. Santa Claus House in North Pole, Alaska claims to have been hosting visitors already since 1952 (<https://www.santaclaushouse.com/visit.asp>). Finland's argument to be Santa's home has been most strongly contested by Greenland:

*"Greenland is strongly contesting Finland's claims to be to be Santa's homeland and is accusing the Finns of abusing the good name of Father Christmas as a cynical marketing ploy. Maya Borritso of the Greenland Tourist Board is convinced that Finland's claim is*



*bogus: 'We don't think it is just Greenland that believes Santa lives here. There has been a long tradition in Europe. Santa lives at the north pole and Greenland is connected to the north pole, but Finland is not.'* Peter Modell, managing director of Copenhagen-based Arctic Adventure, which runs Santa trips to Greenland, agrees: *'Ten years ago Finland started a gimmick saying Father Christmas lived in Finland. That has created an industry of charter planes from all over Europe and lots of money for the country.... But if you go back to the second world war, all kids sent letters to the north pole in Greenland.'* Ulla Pakarinen, director of the Finnish Tourist Board in London, said: *'We are confident the British public believes Santa lives in Finnish Lapland. We have proof because 12,000 visitors are expected this month....'*

The Telegraph, 9.12.1995

Arguments have been made both sides based on a range of evidence: *'Everyone knows Santa Claus comes from Greenland – Walt Disney said so'* (Times, 26.12.1991), while *'Finland points out that Father Christmas cannot live in Greenland because it has no reindeer'* (Times, 20.12.1991).

Not commenting on the truthiness of these claims, while a few decades ago, nobody considered Finland to have anything to do with Father Christmas, today, it is one of the top destinations for tourists around the world eager to visit Santa's home.

### **How did it all begin? Situating Santa's home to Lapland, Finland**

A story well known in Finland tells that in 1927 a self-professed "good friend of Santa", the host of a Finnish children's radio programme, Markus, revealed on air that the secret home of Santa was in Korvatunturi (translates to English as "Ear Fell"), a hill on the Finnish-Russian border (Pretes, 1995):

*'Far, far away in Finnish Lapland, in a world of northern lights and sunless winters, surrounded by trackless wilds, rises Mount Korvatunturi. On the slopes of this mountain there is a curious village, with houses, workshops and stables. It even has its own airfield. So far away from human habitation is this village that no one is known to have seen it, except for a couple of old Lapps who stumbled across it by accident on their travels. Few believed their stories though.*

*Who on earth would want to build a village in such a place?*

*Well, who else but Santa Claus?'*

Kunnas (1981)

Snow, remoteness, certain exclusivity, make this a perfect setting for Santa Claus. To protect his home and also due to its very remote, difficult-to-get-to location, Santa had to move his post office and workshop to Rovaniemi, which is closer to the road network. He began hosting his visitors there. Gradually it became known as Santa Claus Village and the official hometown of Father Christmas. Another story tells that *"the Provincial Governor of Lapland liked Santa Claus so much that he proclaimed all of Finnish Lapland 'Santa Claus Land'"* (archive materials).

This did not happen right away or without difficulties. Based on Finnish newspaper archives, Finland was struggling to attract especially foreign visitors:

*'Tourism in the winter months is extremely quiet. Foreigners do not visit in our country nearly at all, excluding a few small groups during ski holidays. ... there are notably more foreign visitors in Sweden and Norway as the transport opportunities to those countries are much better even during the 'ice age' compared to remote Finland'* (Director Jorma Tolonen, Travel Association of Finland).

After the Lapland war, a lot of reconstruction work took place in Rovaniemi. Lapland and Rovaniemi were the recipients of aid provided by a predecessor of Unicef. The aid organisation then called UNRA, played a role in redeveloping Lapland post-war, in the birth of the Arctic Cabin, and in the birth of related tourism. Related to this aid work, a human rights activist and America's former first lady, Mrs Elenor Roosevelt came to visit Rovaniemi in May 1950 to see the redevelopment work in Lapland. The Arctic Cabin was built in just two weeks as a reception venue to host the prestigious guest, who was the first to sign the guest book of the cabin and post a letter from the Arctic Post Office.

The attention and publicity this visit created marked an important step in building Finnish tourism markets, and in 1956 the cabin had to be extended to host the increasing numbers of visitors passing by to post letters with the Arctic Circle postmark and visit the cabin. A lot of work was conducted at both national and regional levels to



develop tourism in Finland and in Lapland, e.g. by training travel guides and developing accommodation and hiking routes. In 1952, the largest publisher in France, *Librairie Hachette*, announced its plan to make a travel guide of Finland. Increasing interest in Finland as a tourism destination started to rise in Great Britain, according to the Finnish embassy in London, based on the number of visas granted in 1954.

### **The day that marked the birth of Christmas tourism in Finnish Lapland**

In 1972, a British sales representative working for Finnair (the main Finnish airline) visited Lapland for a few days and left with 'a lasting impression.' He began working with the British media to make Finland known as a travel destination. Meanwhile, a founder of a UK based travel agency flew conference delegates to Rovaniemi where they received a gift from Santa. This experience was surprisingly impressive and he began to imagine the opportunities this presented.

On December 25<sup>th</sup> 1984, the first Concorde flight from the UK landed with around 100 British tourists for a day trip to meet Santa in Rovaniemi. This monumental day heralded the introduction of Christmas charter flights to Finnish Lapland. They have since operated each year, grown in number and expanded to other locations in Lapland.

Organised by Goodwood travel agency, the Concorde flight took just less than two hours from London to Rovaniemi. The price tag for the day trip was 799 pounds and demand was high. Practicalities required some work though; airports in Finland, including Rovaniemi, were closed during Christmas and hence, a special permit had to be applied for from the Finnish Civil Aviation Administration. Additional equipment had to be transported from Helsinki airport for the Concorde, and extra care was needed to keep the plane warm during its stay in Rovaniemi.

The day was miraculous, despite the dreadful weather. It attracted a lot of attention from the media and the locals. Around 10,000 locals came to see the plane, causing tens of kilometres of traffic queues (which in the scale of Rovaniemi was tremendous). The plane landed at 12.10 pm and departed again after 7 pm. The visitors got a present from Santa Claus, then were driven by snowmobiles and reindeer, and finally enjoyed a Christmas dinner with over 50 different dishes.

It was important to make use of this attention and interest towards Lapland in the marketing efforts to grow tourism and flight travel in particular. Some claimed all this attention towards the region had been given 'for free' and was not an accomplishment by the Finnish travel industry. It should not be wasted. Otherwise, competitors like Sweden would soon be hosting Concordes in the future instead.

Indeed, the work to grow and develop tourism in Lapland faced challenges. Struggles with the limited infrastructure and service levels, fuelled by debates about Santa's home, generated concerns about the future of the Christmas tourism and whether the Arctic nature and authenticity were enough to keep attracting tourists.

However, the following year, Concorde flights were organised again both at midsummer and Christmas. In 1985, in addition to the BA's Concorde flight from London, Finnair's DC-10 flew from Tokyo with Japanese media and travel agencies onboard to see Lapland and what it has to offer.

Since then, the number of flights has increased steadily, and expanded into other airports in Lapland. In Enontekiö, the first Christmas charter flights landed in 1996. The airport closes for most of the year, but during the Christmas season it gets very crowded. On December 18<sup>th</sup>, 1994, after the EU referendum in Finland and ten years after the first Concorde flight to Rovaniemi, Concorde flew its 31<sup>st</sup> flight to Lapland. During the Christmas season that year, over 10,000 Brits visited Lapland.

### **The Business of Santa Claus today**

Work towards the branding of Lapland and Rovaniemi has been conducted as a collaborative effort by multiple stakeholders. The branding of Rovaniemi as "The Official Hometown of Santa Claus" is a trademark registered in 2010 and is valid in China, Japan, South Korea, Russia, the United States, Norway, and the EU. *"Rovaniemi aims to increase its attractiveness as a place to live, generate more income and employment from tourism, promote the success of local export companies and increase investment in the region"* (Rovaniemi Christmas brand materials, [www.visitrovaniemi.fi](http://www.visitrovaniemi.fi)). The core



values are Authenticity, Giving & Caring, Surprising & Creative, and Constant Presence. The branding also includes “principles of collaboration”, outlining requirements from collaboration partners in the Christmas brand network, such as believing in Santa Claus, responsibility, and continuous quality monitoring and development.

The most important PR person is, of course, Santa Claus himself. His appearance is the result of careful planning and coordination. A group of copywriters and designers were involved in crafting the Santa Claus character decades ago. The real Santa Claus of Lapland has to be *“friendly, personal, and jolly. Outfit according to the culture of Lapland. Mrs Claus had to be warm and gentle, not queenly. Elves had to be joyful, positive fairytale-like.”* (Advertising agency materials 16.10.1985).

Furthermore, the agency outlines Santa’s personal details, including his age (reindeer driving license says pretty old), parents, education, and residence. Santa Claus welcomes visitors every day of the year free of charge at Santa Claus Office. There is another story regarding the history of the office, which unfortunately I cannot go into today, but is another aspect of my research.

## Conclusions

The work of materialising the myth into a socio-material market network involves imagining, discussing, proposing, negotiating and contracting among a range of different businesses (Palo, Mason & Roscoe 2018). Throughout the history of the Santa Claus business in Finland, collaboration has been the key. This consists of collective branding, storytelling, and assembling of the Christmas experience.

Throughout the years, since the Arctic Circle cabin was first built, to the first Concorde flight, and to 3 million registered overnight stays in Lapland, Finland last year of which 52% are international (see infographic at <https://www.lapland.fi/business/facts-figures/infographic-10-facts-about-tourism-in-lapland-2019>), a whole market infrastructure has been built to transport, accommodate, and entertain visitors from all over the world. And still today, a network of actors work to function this market. While travel agencies sell the travel packages at the customer interface, it is often a network of businesses who organise and perform the experience at the destination. Safari tour operators coordinate the functions with their own subcontractors. Smaller businesses and entrepreneurs get involved in the market spectacle, including reindeer and husky farmers, snowmobile renters and drivers, and the snow castle builders. A wide range of resources and skills all come together in a true Christmas spirit.

Certain conditions need to be in place for the myth to become into life. One of the reasons Lapland has become the ideal destination for Christmas tourism is its nature and the reliability of snowy, cold scenes, spiced up by northern lights (if lucky). But nature makes no guarantees. After some unusually warm weather last year, snow arrived very late making both the locals in Finland and the tourists abroad very nervous. Fortunately, the winter did arrive, and this year there are no such concerns. And whatever the weather, Santa and his reindeer will be there working their magic, and Christmas will never be cancelled.

Materialising, transforming and reassembling different elements of the myth into a magical market offering requires a careful choreography among the network of actors with the right conditions in place. The myth legitimises market actions and roles, allowing the actors to calculate what kinds of practices are ‘valuable’ and ‘doable’ in the mythical market. Of course, some elements of the myth are easier to ‘perform’ (snow, coldness, a hut in the middle of the forest) than others (reindeer do not *normally* fly). This storytelling has been, and still is, essential in the working of this market; in situating Santa, his appearance, and meeting with him. Facts and fiction become irrelevant, and the myth becomes reality. Its details become economic facts. The result, when the right conditions are in place, is a magically merry Christmas.

Of course, this market growth has to be sustainable. There is a limit to the growth of any functioning tourist attraction. Christmas season is only once a year, and there is much space and possibilities during the rest of year too. As one of my interviewees put it, ‘Christmas is everyday’, meaning Santa Clausation is more of a spirit of this market rather than a season only. We should all embrace it, be jolly, and be good.

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