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## Midwinter Masking Place and Identity in an Ironworks Community

**Abstract.** In the dead of winter on January 13th each year, an evening masking festival takes place in Gimo, a small rural ironwork community situated in the district of Uppland in central Sweden.

No one knows for certain how old this festival, which on the calendar day of St Knut marks the end of Christmas season, is, but one of the main functions of the festivity nowadays is the opportunity for the population of Gimo to reconnect with friends and neighbours. This is done both while preparing for the main event on January 13th and on the evening of that date when everyone reveals what they secretly have been working on for this year's festivity.

The traditional division of labour between the sexes during the preparations (for Swedish urban standards surprisingly) results in an exchange of work occurring; reaffirming ties between men and women, and of family and friendship within the community.

The main inspiration for dressing up is current events, and the choice of masking can be seen as a form of external monitoring, functioning both as individual expressions and statements of the community as a unity, illustrating political views, humour, and fears.

The research examples in this paper come from the fieldwork carried out during the winter seasons of 2012/2013—2014/2015 in three small rural ironwork communities in the district of Uppland in Sweden: Gimo, Österbybruk and Östhammar. The importance of the masking tradition is especially apparent in Gimo, which will be the main focus in this paper.

**Keywords:** carnival, external monitoring, masks, midwinter festivity, St Knut, Sweden.

### Historic background to the Knut festivities

In the dead of winter on January 13th each year, when the temperature hovers around  $-12^{\circ}$  Celsius, an evening carnival takes place in Gimo, and for one evening the community's population of a mere 2700 more than doubles to approximately 6000 people who attend the festival, drawing both locals and crowds from neighbouring communities and cities (DFU documentation).

It is said that Knut, the saint celebrated on January 13th, carries Christmas out, thus marking the end of the Christmas festivities. Before a new period of labour began however, the last remnants of the Christmas food were to be consumed (Liby 2001). No one knows for certain how old this midwinter masking tradition is, but the local oral tradition promoted in Gimo says it was brought to Sweden by Belgian ironsmith tradesmen in the 17th century—a tradition still kept alive by the community today, i.e. by the ironsmith's descendants (KM exhibit). In the historic sources there is however little proof of this, although what is known is the following:

The name of the festivity, *Knutmasso* or *Knutsmäss*, meaning Knut's mass, is celebrated on St Knut's Day (the name day when the name Knut is celebrated in Sweden). It is derived from two royal Danish saints who became martyrs in the early middle ages: the first saint being King Knut IV of Denmark, who according to the legend was murdered in the Saint Albani church in Odense in Denmark in 1086, and who after canonization came to be celebrated on January 19th in the Roman-Catholic tradition (Swahn 2002a).

In Sweden and Finland, however, the celebration originally took place on January 7th and was dedicated not to the King but to the second saint, the King's nephew, Prince Knut Lavard who was murdered in Haraldsted on January 7th in 1131. The date of his death is significant because the murder occurred at the very end of the Christmas Peace. The Christmas Peace began on St. Tomas Day on December 21st or on Christmas Eve and then stretched over 20 to 23 days. In medieval Swedish law, there was a greater penalty for crimes committed during this period, and this murder committed at the very end of the Christmas peace was therefore thought especially heinous (Swahn 2002a; Swahn 2002b).

In the late 17th century, the Christmas holy days were added to by the church, and the calendar day celebrating Knut was then brought forward in the almanac from January 7th to January 13th. This also meant the end of the Christmas Peace now coincided with a significant time of year: In the old Julian calendar used before 1753 in Sweden, the winter half of the year started with the night of October 14th, and January 13th would then correspond with the Nordic midwinter.

By then the cattle would have been kept in the barns for half the winter and the farmers would now know if their cattle feed would last until spring or not, which was of great significance for their household economies (Ordéus 1967; Bringéus 1976; Swahn 2002: 1).

Examples of Knut festivities can be found in more than one third of the 25 districts in Sweden (Halland, Hälsingland, Härjedalen, Gotland, Skåne, Uppland, Värmland, Västergötland and Östergötland), yet they are surprisingly unknown to the general public as they are commonly only found in small communities and not celebrated on a national level. Examples are also found in the neighbouring countries: Norway, Finland including Åland, and Estonia, pointing towards an originally widespread festivity (DFU documentation, Kulmanen 2007, Ekström & Österlund Pöttsch 2007).

It is likely that the Knut tradition is kin to *kringgång* (here in the meaning of youth wandering around the village, collecting contributions to their gatherings and dances), and bear similarities to the youth activities of other days of the year such as Shrove Tuesday, the evening of Lucia on December 13th, and Walpurgis Night among others. However, the secret planning and masking is also closely related to the practical jokes once played around Christmas in numerous parts of Sweden, where a figure of wood or hay could be left in someone's home with a note containing a rude message pinned to it. A *Knut* (a dressed up wooden log or man of hay) could also be left to signal that the household had no Christmas treats to offer, which was perceived as something shameful—yet for our understanding links the *kringgång* with the practical jokes (Ordéus 1967). People could also dress up as Knut men themselves and

*“secretly gather and mask themselves beyond recognition and then as Knut men go visiting in houses and farms at dusk on St Knut's Day <...> the purpose was to sweep out Christmas at the same time, as the interaction between the masked and their hosts was of great importance. Through conversation the masked Knut men's anonymity was to be kept by one part and revealed by the other. In a local society where everyone knew one another and the rules of behavior were set it could be of great significance to be allowed to appear anonymously”* (Liby 2001).

### **The Knut festivities today**

Although the historic origins of the festivity have been lost over time, especially after the transition from a Catholic to a Protestant country in the 16th century when the importance of saints diminished in Sweden, the festivities still continue (Montgomery 2002). One of the main functions of the festivity nowadays is the opportunity for the population of Gimo to reconnect with relatives, friends and neighbours—both while preparing for the festivity and on the evening of January 13th when everyone reveals what they secretly have been working on.

In the post-war years, the festival has changed fundamentally, from a mumming tradition where participants dressed up to go knocking on neighbours doors and where spirits were served, to a vivid street festival including carnival floats of various sizes, street vendors, and a midnight disco including a competitive element where the best masked groups are announced and awarded.

Simultaneously, the tradition of children knocking on doors has been more or less replaced by an activity planned by adults for the younger children (in the ages 2 to around 9), and held in the community square earlier in the day; “the children’s Knut” with ring dances around the town square Christmas tree, and award ceremony for the best costumes, and candy being given to all the participating children.

The technique of mask construction has also changed, and the traditional textile and papier-mâché built masks are now competing with modern material and electric tools involving foam rubber, modern felt textiles and hot glue guns. Mass-produced masks can of course also be bought from costume shops (DFU documentation).

### **Preparing for Carnival: female and male spheres**

In preparation for the carnival, groups of people get together to collaborate. There are different types of group constellations depending on age, gender, family and friend ties, for instance. Following two of these groups, or *gangs* (the term they themselves use), a surprisingly traditional division of labour between the sexes could be observed

(i.e. compared to the division of labour found in cities): people were more specialised but also rely on the other to help out if needed, resulting in an exchange of work, reaffirming ties between men and women, and of family and friendship within the community (DFU documentation).

The first gang I was invited to follow from December 2012 to January 2013 was a group of eight married or divorced women, who either worked together or were related to each other. Their work began with a first meeting where a theme was more or less democratically decided upon, which was then followed by subsequent gatherings to order materials, sew the costumes, and construct a small carnival



*Fig. 1. The female gang preparing for St Knut in Gimo, 2013. Photo: Marlene Hugoson. Copyright: Institute of Language and Folklore*

float. The female activity was well organised and took place in the warmth of someone's home and garage. The women took turns inviting the rest of the *gang* and to serve *fika* (i.e. to drink coffee or tea, often accompanied with pastries or sandwiches). The women drank alcohol on the first meeting while planning the event and on the night of the festivity itself, but not while working on the costumes and the float (Fig. 1). They were talkative, and used traditionally feminine materials such as textiles, and not very many machines or tools besides the screw driver, hammer, sewing machine and stereo for the music which was to be part of their act. Their theme for 2013 was poodles as one of the main expressions in politics in 2012 had been "att göra en pudel", 'to make a poodle,' i.e. to apologise. The music they chose to play on the carnival float was "Who let the dogs out" performed by the Baha Men, to which the *gang* sang along. The choice of dressing up as poodles also meant that the members of the group could act like dogs: barking and jumping up at people and in one instance walking up to a local Police officer and humping his leg—something the woman behind the poodle mask was unlikely to have done and got away with at any other time, but as this was the night of the carnival the ordinary rules and boundaries of acceptable social behaviour were off (DFU documentation 2012/2013).

The activity in the male *gang* was very different. I had the privilege of documenting a group of six married fathers and their children plus a few friends of the children (both boys and girls of different ages) during their preparations in January 2015. Their large *gang* worked in an industrial building on the outskirts of Gimo. It was cold, dirty and untidy. For the first gathering I attended, wooden planks with sharp nails lay on the floor, spiky side up. At another meeting two mice lay dead on the floor. However, the atmosphere was friendly and unfussy. The men did not talk much, and their work involved traditionally masculine materials such as wood, metal and stone, and they used a lot of tools (saws, screwdrivers, circular saws, blowtorch, and welder) and slightly more advanced technology than the women, including lights and a large stereo system which was mounted on their carnival float (Fig. 2). As younger men, they used to drink quite heavily at these meetings, but as married fathers with children present the gatherings had turned into sober affairs, although a few of the fathers who had older children did have a drink on the



*Fig. 2. The male gang preparing for St Knut in Gimo, 2015.  
Photo: Marlene Hugoson. Copyright: Institute of Language and Folklore*

evening of the 13th, i.e. the ones that were not the designated drivers for the evening. The *gang's* chosen theme in 2015 was cannibals, and although their work appeared more unstructured compared to the women's work, it resulted in a great and attention-grabbing carnival float, filled with cannibals cooking (pretend) human bodies over an open fire and in a huge metal pot (DFU documentation 2015).

### **Midwinter masking**

The main inspiration for dressing up is current events. For children, this is what is relevant in their world, mainly innocent and entertaining themes from television, music and movies (Disney, DreamWorks, Star Wars, or the televised Advent Calendar broadcasted just before

Christmas), but also sports and fairy tales including animals and animated objects, and of course, the seasonal inspiration of wintertime and the Christmas period that is coming to an end.

Television, music and movies are sources of inspiration for the adults as well (both in the shape of television adverts and popular movies such as *Pirates of the Caribbean* or *Bat Man*), but also the funny, scary or erotic – as there was some flirting going on both in the street and later at the midnight disco, another example of how masks and costumes allow for more daring behaviour (KM. DFU documentation).

### **Politics in Masking**

Among the masks in the carnival there were also masks that diverge from the purely entertaining ones, masks inspired by politics. The first set of examples has to do with the portrayal of politicians who have misbehaved on a local or national level:

In Österbybruk in 2014, a cage containing “the ghost of the council” was paraded around the community square to criticise one of their local politicians who had misbehaved (DFU documentation 2014).

In a show of solidarity, another group of men in Gimo dressed up as Sami people in 2015, stating: “We are Swedes too”. This was in response to a comment made by Björn Söder, party secretary for the Swedish Nationalist Party, saying the Sami were not Swedes, a comment many found offensive (DFU documentation 2015).

This ridiculing of people in power serves as a social instrument of conduct, illustrating limitations to what is seen as acceptable behaviour. It is also a display of democracy, as the targeted politicians can do nothing to stop this type of comedic criticism.

### **Defusing international conflicts**

The second set of examples is of representations involving situations of international conflict. At face level, the appearance of a “Russian submarine crew”, led by President Putin himself (in the form of a younger man wearing a papier-mâché head), and with a (wooden and papier-mâché constructed) submarine in tow (Fig. 3—4) is a humorous response to the increased political tension around the Baltic



*Fig. 3. What is the appearance of a "Russian submarine crew" in the small community of Gimo in 2015 an expression of? Photo: Marlene Hugoson. Copyright: Institute of Language and Folklore*



*Fig. 4. Stockholm archipelago, see you again, and "Still at large". Gimo, 2015. Photo: Marlene Hugoson. Copyright: Institute of Language and Folklore*

Sea, and the media reported incidents involving Russian submarines in the Swedish archipelago, but on a deeper level, you may find something more (DFU documentation 2015).

The background to understanding why a representation of a Russian submarine and also a Russian tank appears in this context is part current events, part historic. Talking to people who live along the Swedish coastline facing the Baltic Sea, you sometimes meet fear of a new Russian attack, even though more than three hundred years has passed since Russian imperial forces devastated the countryside and the iron works along the coast line of the district of Uppland, and more than two hundred years has passed since the Finnish war of 1808—1809 when troops of the Russian Empire were last seen on Swedish ground, and almost a hundred years has passed since the First World War when fear of the Communist revolution spread (SOFI documentation. Persson 2002. Karlsson 2002).

For decades, however, there have been reports of foreign submarines in Swedish waters including the archipelago surrounding the capitol of Stockholm, and when the Russian submarine S-363 (better known as U 137 in Sweden) ran around at Torhamnaskär in the archipelago outside Karlskrona in October 1981, it strengthened the Swedish suspicions and caused a diplomatic frenzy (Hellberg & Jörle 1984).

Then in 2014 and 2015, media coverage began to intensify once again with reports of Russian submarines in and near Swedish waters, Russian military planes in and close to Swedish airspace, and of Russian military ships disturbing both a Finnish research vessel carrying Finnish and Swedish scientists and the NordBalt operation laying a submarine power cable to increase trading between the Nordic and Baltic energy markets.

The Swedish evening newspapers *Aftonbladet* and *Expressen* and the daily newspaper *Dagens Nyheter* fed into the old fears of a Russian attack and initiated a media frenzy. This in turn opened the door to a debate on Swedish membership in NATO, something Swedes have traditionally been against as it goes against the idea of Swedish neutrality and freedom of alliance. It also opened a discussion on the Swedish Defence budget. The daily newspaper *Svenska Dagbladet* gave somewhat more nuanced reports, and together with *Dagens*

*Nyheter* the paper dug more deeply into the roots of the sudden political tension, explaining the increased military activity as a Russian response to the intensified Swedish and Finnish cooperation with the North Atlantic Treaty Organization NATO (Appendix: sample of daily newspapers).

In Gimo, the younger generation gives a comedic response to the media coverage; perhaps they do not perceive an attack as a real threat, but feel that the world is smaller now and that we are all neighbours, or perhaps they do get apprehensive and even scared, but use humour to defuse the tension surrounding the issue by portraying that which they fear. Again it can also be interpreted as ridicule used as a social instrument of conduct, in this case condemning the trespassing on Swedish borders (DFU documentation 2015).

A previous example of a mask of this ‘defusing’ type can be found in the Knut themed museum in Gimo, where a traditional papier-mâché mask of Usama bin Laden is on display. It was made as a response to 9/11 in 2001 when al-Qaeda attacked the United States and the hunt for Usama bin Ladin ensued (KM exhibit). Seen in the light of world events following the Arab Spring and the rise of ISIS after 2010, however, the mere existence of such a mask in a public exhibit suddenly felt potentially dangerous for the museum and its staff, but then again it is a little-known museum dedicated to a little-known festivity in a little-known community.

### **Stereotypes versus political correctness**

At the same time as you get these politically inspired masks, there is a degree of political correctness and an awareness of the dangers of stereotyping, thus illustrating the limitations and boundaries in the choices of costume.

The group of fathers and children I documented in 2015 had chosen to dress up as cannibals using stereotypical representations of persons of African descent to do so (Fig. 5). Only two days before the carnival the group had suddenly realized that their choice of costume might be a problem. One of the fathers was upset by the situation and explained that their motive was never a racist one. In their minds cannibals, like Vikings (a previous year’s theme), appeared to



*Fig. 5. Fictional cannibals or stereotypical representations? Gimo, 2015.  
Photo: Marlene Hugoson. Copyright: Institute of Language and Folklore*

be more kindred to fictional characters than actual people. Had the carnival taken place in a city, like nearby Uppsala, the *gang* would almost certainly have found themselves in a world of trouble with the spectators, and would most likely have been both booed and reported to the Police for visual 'hate speech' for dressing up this way, but as this transgression transpired in the countryside, where the participants were known to be good family members and neighbours, their choice of costumes was interpreted as nothing more or less than the intended funny/scary cannibals (compare with the discussions during the 2009 Ritual Year conference in Kaunas, Lithuania, on the topics of Zwarte Piet in the Netherlands, 'Gypsy' carts in Southern France, and the Jewish and Romani masks used in Estonia and Lithuania, etcetera) (DFU documentation 2015).

## Conclusion

At the darkest and coldest time of the year the people of Gimo arrange a carnival to mark the end of Christmas. During the preparations, they reconnect with family, friends and neighbours in a united effort to entertain themselves and others. Within the *gangs*, the amusing secret of this year's theme is also kept until the night of the festivity when all is revealed.

The use of current events in the choice of masking can be seen as a form of external monitoring/analysis, an expression and reflection of what is happening in the world, and of what is relevant to the people in the community—either for its importance or its entertaining and comedic value in the carnival. It expresses ideas that people are pro or against; what makes them laugh, what makes them angry, and what makes them scared, and in this way gives expression to both individuality and functions as a statement of the community as a unity.

### Appendix. Sample of daily newspapers (in chronological order to illustrate the development)

Blix, Hans & Ekéus, Rolf & Hirdman, Sven. 2014. Går Sverige med i Nato ökar Rysslands misstro mot väst. [Russian Distrust of the West Increases if Sweden Joins NATO (in Swedish)]. *Dagens Nyheter*. January 25.

Theander, Martin. 2014. Färre svenskar vill se medlemskap i Nato. [(Official opinion poll among Swedes) Fewer Swedes Wants NATO Membership (in Swedish).] *Svenska Dagbladet*. March 14.

Lindberg, Johan. 2014. Rysk övning mot Sverige blev en väckarklocka. [Russian Exercise on Sweden a Wakeup Call (in Swedish).] *Svenska Dagbladet*. April 19.

Hansson, Wolfgang. 2014. Är Sverige smygvägen på väg in i Nato? [Is Sweden Sneaking into NATO? (in Swedish)] *Aftonbladet*. August 26.

Holmström, Mikael. 2014. Nato ger Sverige "guldkort". [NATO Gives Sweden "Gold Card" (in Swedish).] *Svenska Dagbladet*. September 2.

Granlund, John & Nilsson, Martin. 2014. Ryska stridsplan ska ha kränkt svenskt luftrum. [Russian Fighter Planes to Have Violated Swedish Airspace (in Swedish).] *Aftonbladet*. September 18.

Holmström, Mikael. 2014. Här jagar ryskt jaktplan svenskt FRA-flyg. [(Photo comment) Here a Russian Fighter Hunts a Swedish FRA-Plane (in Swedish).] *Svenska Dagbladet*. October 1.

- Holmström, Mikael. 2014. Skadad rysk ubåt söks i skärgården. [Wounded Russian Submarine Sought in the Archipelago (in Swedish).] *Svenska Dagbladet*. October 18.
- Lapidus, Arne. 2014. Fjärdarnas krig blossar upp igen. [The War of the Coastal Inlets Flares up Again (in Swedish).] *Expressen*. October 18.
- Mächs, Mattias & Thurfjell, Karin. 2014. Försvarsexperten: "Detta bekräftar att det är en rysk ubåt." [Defense Expert: "This Confirms It's a Russian Submarine" (in Swedish).] *Svenska Dagbladet*. October 19.
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- Holender, Robert. 2015. Ryska örlogsfartyg stör kabelläggning till Sverige. [Russian War Ships Disturbs Laying of Cable to Sweden (in Swedish).] *Dagens Nyheter*. May 2.
- de la Reguera, Erik. 2015. Jas-plan ingrep mot ryska bombplan. [Jas Plane Intervened Agains Russian Bombers (in Swedish).] *Dagens Nyheter*. May 21.
- Karlsson, Pär & Dickson, Staffan. 2015. Sverige Tycker: Ja till Nato-medlemskap [(Opinion Pole among Aftonbladet's readers) Sweden Thinks: Yes to NATO Membership (in Swedish)]. *Aftonbladet*. May 27.

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KM exhibit—The museum's exhibition of masks.

KM—Online photo archive: <http://www.knutmasso.se/>

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# **THE RITUAL YEAR 11**

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