

*Rudolph, the red-nosed reindeer,
Had a very shiny nose.
And if you ever saw it,
You would even say it glows.*
— Johnny Marks

St. Nicholas probably became associated with reindeer through the fascination outsiders have had for the land of the Sámi (once known as Lapland) since the publication of Johannes Schefferus' 1673 *Lapponia*. So says professor Troy Storfjell of Pacific Lutheran University, who studies the Sámi, the indigenous peoples of circumpolar Scandinavia.

Reindeer antlers were used in British winter solstice celebrations and dances dating back to at least 1226, but Santa's association with reindeer first shows up in print in "A Visit from St. Nicholas." The association was solidified, says Storfjell, when an American businessman, Carl Lomen, took a herd of 76 reindeer with accompanying Sámi and Inuit herders on tour across the U.S. He was prompted by the "Yes, Virginia, there is a Santa Claus" editorial published in the *New York Sun* in 1897. Lomen wasn't trying to promote Santa; he was actually trying to sell reindeer meat.

The fact that Santa's reindeer fly may well also be tied into an explanation of why Santa usually wears a red suit, according an article by mycologist Jonathan Ott. Santa's red hat with its white pom-pom looks a lot like *Amanita muscaria*, commonly called fly agaric. *A. muscaria* is the cool-looking mushroom with a bright red cap spotted with white you might remember from books of fairy tales or even the 1980s cartoon *The Smurfs*.

Victorian-era travelers in the 1800s came home with stories of exotic reindeer and of fly agaric consumption in Siberia and the far north that would have made their way



Amanita muscaria

into the folklore of the time. *A. muscaria* can be quite poisonous, and a related mushroom called death cap is lethal. However as reindeer (called caribou in the U.S.) know, fly agaric will also make you hallucinate. According to a 1989 book by Ronald Siegel called *Intoxication*, reindeer eat the mushrooms and become so inebriated they stagger around and sometimes wind up getting eaten by wolves.

Sámi shaman, called *noaidi*, were said to eat the dried mushrooms themselves or to feed the fresh mushrooms to the reindeer to remove the more toxic elements and then consume reindeer urine. Some claim this trance induced by consuming the urine of one who has eaten the hallucinogenic shrooms is the origin of the phrase "to get pissed." The hallucinations brought on by *A. muscaria* include a feeling of flying. During the trance brought on by the mushrooms, writes Roger Highfield, the shaman's soul would "leave the body as an animal and fly to the otherworld to communicate with the spirits." So our modern American Santa may have his origins in indigenous hallucinogenic religious traditions.

The Sámi have many words for different kinds of reindeer, but it's doubtful any of those words involve describing one with a red nose. Rudolph the red-nosed reindeer raised Santa's herd to nine when he appeared in 1939 thanks to a Montgomery Ward advertising campaign. Montgomery Ward executives were a bit concerned that the idea of a red nose would associate Rudolph with drunkards, writes Snopes.com, but Rudolph was soon a hit, and later a hit song.

So Santa as we know him — the jolly fat man in the red suit with flying reindeer — is a folk tradition stemming from Catholic saints, Scandinavian elves and tripping shamans, made more famous by various newspapers and advertising campaigns. Is his workshop going to slip into the sea with the rest of the ice at the North Pole? That remains to be seen, but Santa himself will live on and maybe even continue to change.

As Francis P. Church once wrote to Virginia: "Virginia, there is a Santa Claus. He exists as certainly as love and generosity and devotion exist, and you know that they abound and give to your life its highest beauty and joy. Alas! how dreary would be the world if there were no Santa Claus."

EW

*He sprang to his sleigh, to his team gave a whistle,
And away they all flew like the down of a thistle.
But I heard him exclaim, 'ere he drove out of sight,
"Happy Christmas to all, and to all a good-night!"*
— "A Visit from St. Nicholas"

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