

Bad Santa: cultural heritage, mystification of the Arctic, and tourism as an extractive industry

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Abstract

This article assesses the construction of cultural geographies of the European far North through an exploration of how Arctic motifs and imaginaries are used in the Christmas tourism industry in Finnish Lapland, and particularly in the city of Rovaniemi, which advertises itself as the ‘Official Hometown of Santa Claus’. Specifically, we draw parallels between Christmas tourism and Arctic mining by examining the similarities and interconnections between them. This highlights how these industries are related to the Arctic landscape they operate in and how both are ultimately embedded in similar cultural perceptions of and engagements with Lapland dating back centuries. A long-term perspective on Arctic geographical imaginaries enables a critical assessment of how the tourism and mining industries are both steeped in the exoticization and mythologizing of the Arctic on the one hand and in a tradition of material and symbolic exploitation of northern resources on the other. This approach helps researchers to highlight a problematic character of the current development of Christmas tourism in Lapland.

Keywords: Arctic, Christmas tourism, cultural imaginaries, extractive industries, cultural heritage, Lapland, resources

Introduction

In December 2018, a Coca-Cola ‘Christmas truck’ toured Finland for the first time. Familiar from TV commercials around the globe since the 1990s, the vehicle – a US-made and Finnish-owned truck taped over with Coca-Cola Christmas imagery and rigged with elaborate Christmas lights – generated substantial public and media interest in Finland already before the beginning of the tour. The truck reportedly caused a serious traffic jam in Oulu, one of the largest cities in Finland, as

people queued to see the vehicle when it was on show at a hypermarket outside the city centre.¹ More interestingly, the 2018 Finnish tour was the first time that a Coca-Cola Christmas truck crossed the Arctic Circle. This took place just north of Rovaniemi, the provincial capital of Finnish Lapland and a globally leading centre of Christmas tourism since the 1980s (Figure 1). The Coca-Cola Company's media releases celebrated the crossing of the Arctic Circle, which included the truck's visit to the Santa Claus Village, a premier tourist attraction in Rovaniemi. The company highlighted the Finnish connection of their iconic Santa Claus figure that was originally designed in the 1930s by the son of a Finnish emigrant to the United States.² Local tourism operators were excited over the global advertising value that the Coca-Cola truck's tour brought to Lapland and its tourism industry.³



Figure 1. A Coca-Cola truck exhibited outside a hypermarket in Rovaniemi.

This marketing event, and how it was portrayed in the media, echoes a range of cultural tropes, some ancient and others more recent, associated with ideas of the North and the Arctic in the context of tourism and beyond. The Arctic, and Lapland in particular, has long featured as an exotic and mystical fantasyland in European mindscapes and Christmas tourism predominantly taps into

¹ Pirttikoski, "Coca-Colan joulurekka".

² <https://www.coca-cola.fi/stories/coca-cola-joulurekka-pysahtyi-napapiirillae-ensimmaeisen-kerran> (25 June 2019).

³ E.g. Visit Rovaniemi (25 June 2019).

this imagery. The specific spectacle that was made of the Coca-Cola truck's crossing of the Arctic Circle is rooted in a centuries-long cultural tradition of how the Arctic is perceived, represented and engaged with. It is also replicated in everyday tourism practice in the Santa Claus Village, with visitors 'ritually' entering the Arctic by stepping over the line marking the Arctic Circle at the site.⁴

Lapland tourism is soaring today and the Santa Claus Village in Rovaniemi is expanding rapidly, but this current boom has very long roots. Lapland has attracted European travellers especially since the eighteenth century, but the interest in and curiosity about the far North dates back to Arctic exploration since the 'age of discoveries' and ultimately to the classical Graeco-Roman antiquity (c. 800 BC to AD 500).⁵ The 'true' geographical Arctic was not really known in the ancient world, but the idea of the far North fascinated classical Greeks and Romans who located the nebulous lands of Hyperborea and Thule there.⁶ Various modern concepts and perceptions of the Arctic are founded on and reflect this classical heritage of imagining the far North, including the ambiguous perception of the North as a mystical enchanted realm on the one hand and a barely inhabitable, uncivilized land of untapped resources on the other.⁷ In this article, we explore contemporary Christmas tourism in Finnish Lapland in relation to the long-term cultural histories and ideas of the North, dialoguing our research on Christmas tourism with the rich scholarship of various disciplines (e.g. history, geography and anthropology) with diverse specific aspects of 'the North'. The North and the far North are relative terms which do not have any fixed geographical reference, but in the context of this article we generally use them to refer to the circumpolar and Arctic regions of Europe – that is, the Nordic world (or Fennoscandia) and particularly its central and northern parts. These regions are characterized by taiga and tundra landscapes and are historically, culturally and geographically somewhat different from the 'South' of the Nordic world.⁸ Our more specific geographical focus is on Finnish Lapland, a province that is mostly located above the Arctic Circle.

Since classical antiquity, the far North – as an idea and actual geographical region – has fused realities and imaginaries in a prominent manner, which has also affected concrete engagements with the European Arctic. While Christmas tourism taps into Arctic fantasies, it is simultaneously, even

⁴ Varnajot, "Walk the line".

⁵ See Byrne, *Geographies of the Romantic North*; Andersson Burnett, "Abode of Satan"

⁶ Davidson, *The Idea of North*; Naum, "Between Utopia and Dystopia".

⁷ Naum, "Between Utopia and Dystopia".

⁸ Hall, Müller and Saarinen, *Nordic Tourism: Issues and Cases*. See also Herva and Lahelma, *Northern Archaeology and Cosmology* for a long-term perspective.

if less obviously, grounded on the long-standing notions of the far North as a resource space and an arena for resources exploitation, as we discuss in this article. Our conceptualization of Christmas tourism as a form of extractive industry is, first and foremost, a metaphor. Tourism is a very different industry to mining, of course, but acknowledging its direct and indirect links to resource exploitation in the Arctic nonetheless affords a fresh angle on how Christmas tourism extracts and appropriates historical and cultural resources in Lapland, and the implications that this has for local communities. The notion that Christmas tourism extracts cultural resources for its own purposes may seem somewhat shallow and superficial, but as we will show in this article, these two industries intersect, or are entangled with each other, in a number of historical and cultural ways.

Arctic tourism and extractive industries are both subject to debates related to, for example, sustainability, nature preservation, land use, and indigenous rights.⁹ The Arctic environment is recognized to be particularly vulnerable in the face of environmental and climate change, which emphasizes the importance of responsible and respectful engagements with the Arctic.¹⁰ Christmas tourism has been assessed from this and several other perspectives recently,¹¹ and it is well known today that tourism in general generates multiple problems, many of which are relevant also in the specific context of Finnish Lapland. We take a number of these issues and assess them in a culturally and temporally deeper setting, specifically in relation to the ambiguous cultural legacies of imagining the far North,¹² and how these legacies are still present in contemporary practices of Christmas tourism. The dialoguing between Christmas tourism, Arctic mining and the cultural ideas of the far North enables the repositioning or recontextualizing Christmas tourism. This way our approach seeks to provide a clearer view on the exploitative character and negative impacts caused by Christmas tourism (through, for instance, misappropriation of local cultural heritage) and also the entanglement of Arctic mining with fantasies of the far North. The long-term entanglement of tourism and mining with imageries, in turn, is critical to understanding the roots of the conflicts and

⁹ E.g. Hall and Saarinen, “Polar Tourism”; Palma et al. “Cruising the Marginal Ice Zone”

¹⁰ Hovelsrud et al., “Arctic Societies, Cultures and Peoples”.

¹¹ See Grenier, “The Diversity of Polar Tourism”; Hall, “Santa Claus, place branding and competition”; Hall, “Changement climatique”; Hall, “Will Climate Change Kill Santa Claus”; Saarinen and Tervo, “Sustainability and Emerging Awareness”; Rusko et al., “Coopetition, Resource-Based View and Legend”; Tervo-Kankare et al., “Christmas Tourists’ Perceptions”; Castéran and Roederer, “Does authenticity really affect Behaviour”; Falk and Vieru, “International Tourism Demand to Finnish Lapland”.

¹² Cf. Komu, “Dreams of Treasures”.

controversies around Arctic tourism and mining; that is, how they go far beyond immediate and ‘rational’ concerns.¹³

The damaging character of Christmas tourism to local communities in Lapland is ultimately grounded on colonialist ideas and practices reproduced within tourism, however unintentionally and unknowingly. The colonialist heritage is more obvious in some elements of Christmas tourism than in others, but a key point, nonetheless, is that what might initially appear as a harmless fantasy has rather dark undertones to it. This colonialist heritage also brings together the dualistic perceptions of the European far North, as referred to above, and provides a context and setting for a deeper examination of Christmas tourism in relation to extractive industries. While it may not be readily obvious, there is a dark side to the cultural exploitation of Christmas tourism: it draws resources from the local natural and cultural environment in a manner that threatens local communities, even though it is commonly regarded as an economic imperative in Lapland today. This also explains, in part, the excitement generated by the Coca-Cola truck.

In this article, we analyse various aspects of Christmas tourism and mining in relation to each other and imageries of the Arctic and dialogue between the past and present. More specifically, we trace connections and entanglements – some more obvious and direct than others – between Arctic tourism and extractive industries in Lapland, and how they are grounded on similar ideas and perceptions of the European far North. Rather than a specific set of data subjected to a formal analysis, we employ a broadly hermeneutic approach and a ‘deep contextualization’ of various features of Christmas tourism. Thus, we dialogue between our own ethnographic observations at Christmas tourism sites and the previous research on Santa Claus tourism in the region on the one hand and the histories of imagining Lapland and the European Arctic on the other.

Background: Santa Claus and Christmas tourism in Rovaniemi

Rovaniemi is the leading centre of Christmas tourism in the Nordic countries and has ‘the greatest concentration of Santa and Christmas related infrastructure in terms of theme parks and activities as well as the most overt use of Santa in branding’.¹⁴ The city of Rovaniemi has branded itself as the

¹³ Cf. Komu, *Pursuing the Good Life in the North*.

¹⁴ Hall, “Santa Claus, Place branding and Competition”, 61.

‘official hometown of Santa Claus’,¹⁵ and more specifically where his ‘urban office’ is located, as the Finnish folklore holds that Santa’s actual home is on the Korvatunturi fell, in a remote and almost inaccessible region in north-eastern Lapland. This folklore originates from 1927, when Markus-setä (‘Uncle Markus’), the host of a popular Finnish radio show, announced Korvatunturi as the home of Santa Claus. This also marks the beginning of the mystification of Lapland in relation to Santa Claus.¹⁶ The radio show ran for 29 years and helped to ‘embed the Lapland Christmas story in Finnish contemporary folklore’.¹⁷

It was not until the 1980s, however, that Santa Claus was really harnessed for developing tourism in Finnish Lapland. Indeed, the Finnish Tourism Board established a Santa Claus Work Group in 1984 with the goal of promoting the idea that Lapland was the ‘true’ home of Santa Claus.¹⁸ In addition, the governor of Lapland declared the province as ‘Santa Claus Land’ the same year and the arrival of the first charter flight of the Concorde supersonic airplane from Heathrow to Rovaniemi generated substantial international media attention.¹⁹ Today, some 35 years later, Visit Finland (a national destination management organization) asserts that ‘everyone knows the one and only Santa Claus is Finnish and lives in Lapland. However, as the exact location of his hideaway is not known, it is best to head to his Rovaniemi office.’²⁰

The Santa Claus Village in Rovaniemi was opened in 1985 and has subsequently become the centre of Christmas tourism in Lapland (Figure 2).²¹ The Village was established eight kilometres north of the town itself, where small-scale tourism facilities connected to the Arctic Circle landmark were already in place. The village, which included catering services and souvenir shops, was constructed in close proximity to the wooden cabin built in the 1950s, when Eleanor Roosevelt visited

¹⁵ Visit Rovaniemi (21 February 2019).

¹⁶ M. Pretes, “Postmodern Tourism”.

¹⁷ Tervo-Kankare et al., “Christmas Tourists’ Perceptions”, 296.

¹⁸ Hall, “Santa Claus, Place Branding and Competition”, 59-67; Pretes, “Postmodern Tourism”.

¹⁹ Grenier, ‘The diversity of polar tourism’, pp. 55-72; Pretes, ‘Postmodern tourism’, pp. 1-15.

²⁰ Visit Finland (25 February 2019).

²¹ Pretes, “Postmodern Tourism”; Rusko et al., “Coopetition, Resource-Based View and Legend”; Tervo-Kankare, et al., “Christmas Tourists’ Perceptions”; Varnajot, “Walk the Line”.

Rovaniemi.²² From the tourism industry perspective, the Santa Claus Village and the various Arctic Circle landmarks are gateways and beyond them, lies the ‘real Arctic’.²³



Figure 2. A view on the Santa Claus Village in Rovaniemi. The poles with electric lanterns are supposed to mark the Arctic Circle, with Santa's office right beyond the line in the background.

²² Löytynoja, "The Development of Specific Locations"; Timothy, *Tourism and Political Boundaries*; Zelinsky, "Where Every Town is Above Average".

²³ See Viken, "What is Arctic Tourism".



Figure 3. Entrance to SantaPark in Rovaniemi.

Additionally, an underground amusement park, SantaPark, was opened right next to the Santa Claus Village in 1998 (Figure 3). Built in an unused bomb shelter, SantaPark markets itself as the ‘Home Cavern of Santa Claus’ and as the only place in the world where the Arctic Circle can be crossed underground.²⁴ Meeting Santa Claus is a central experience in both the Village and the Park, with opportunities to have a short chat and pose for a photograph with Santa. Besides this core activity, gravitates a host of other Christmas-, Lapland- or Arctic-related activities (Figure 4). For example, the Santa Claus Village provides opportunities for shopping, taking snowmobile, husky or reindeer rides, sending letters and postcards from Santa’s (official) post office, as well as exploring the Moomin Snowcastle. In SantaPark, the visitor can venture into an ice gallery, learn how to be an elf at the elf school, bake pastries with Mrs Gingerbread, attend an elf show, or mail letters and postcards from (another) Santa’s post office. Also, accommodation and catering services are provided in both locations.

²⁴ Varnajot, “Walk the Line”.

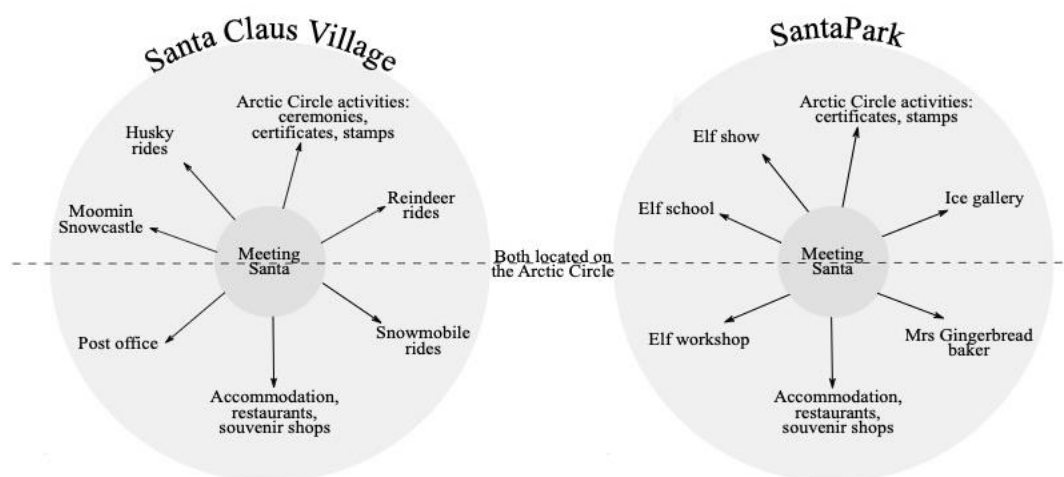


Figure 4. Summary of Santa Claus attractions in Rovaniemi.

The tourism industry in Rovaniemi has expanded significantly since the mid-1980s. In 2018, Rovaniemi – a town of approximately 35,000 inhabitants – registered about 664,000 overnight stays, 444,000 of which were by foreign visitors.²⁵ Some 225,000 people visited the Santa Claus Village during its first year of operation and today around 400,000 visitors venture in the Village annually.²⁶ The main groups of visitors by nationality in terms of overnight stays in Rovaniemi comprise of Chinese (49,100 visitors), British (39,400), French (33,100), Israeli (28,900) and Germans (28,800).²⁷

Tourism and mining in Lapland

Tourist operators frequently express criticism towards mining operations in Lapland because tourism and mining have conflicting interests as regards land use and the environment. Modern mining disrupts and often pollutes the areas it exploits, whereas the tourist appeal of Arctic Europe is founded primarily on the idea of an untouched wilderness that mining compromises.²⁸ Historically, however, tourism and extractive industries have co-existed and intersected on the northern reaches of Europe for a long time: Lapland has appeared as an exciting destination to travellers and an arena for smaller or larger scale industrial mining for centuries. Indeed, the great northern mines in the peripheral regions of central and northern Sweden, such as the Falun mine,

²⁵ Visit Rovaniemi (22 February 2019).

²⁶ Pretes, "Postmodern Tourism".

²⁷ Visit Rovaniemi (22 February 2019).

²⁸ Saarinen, "Tourism in Northern Wilderness".

were themselves among the important tourist attractions already in early modern period.²⁹ Mining operations act as tourist attractions also today in many parts of the world,³⁰ including the Nordic countries. For instance, mining history is the primary attraction of Outokumpu, a small mining town in the south-eastern part of Finland, whereas Falun has been a UNESCO World Heritage site since the year 2001, and mining landscapes in Malmberget or Kiruna in northernmost Sweden are also available for tourist consumption.

Besides their historical connections, tourism and mining are thematically linked in two ways in the European far North (and beyond). Firstly, while mining may appear as a distinctively rational and economic endeavour, it echoes age-old dreams of the North as a source of riches and treasure.³¹ Historically, these riches have come in diverse forms, from amber and unicorn horns (narwhale tusks) to gold and other metals since ancient times.³² This dream-like fantasizing about riches may not be explicit in the context of contemporary large-scale mining, but it is prominent in the context of Lapland's gold prospecting. This heritagization and romanticization of gold digging is presumably connected to the small scale of the prospecting, as well as the perception of gold as a 'pure' and 'noble' substance and an archetypal stuff of treasures, which fit in the broader dream-like construction of Lapland. Industrial mining began in Arctic Sweden (a part of which Finland and Finnish Lapland were at the time) in the 1630s, with the discovery of silver ore in Nasafjäll,³³ although extractive industries had been central to the Swedish economy and to the country's national identity since the Middle Ages.³⁴ In the seventeenth century, the Falun mine alone produced two-thirds of the copper used in Europe,³⁵ which in part explains the curiosity that European travellers had for the northern mines as awe-inspiring and enchanted places where advanced technology was entangled with the magical experience of the subterranean world in a strange land.³⁶ The 'southern' (or non-local) interests in the northernmost reaches of the continent have been fuelled, since early modern times, by a combination of curiosity and mapping of

²⁹ Naum, "Enchantment of the Underground".

³⁰ E.g., Pretes, "Touring Mines and Mining Tourists".

³¹ Komu, "Dreams of Treasures".

³² Davidson, *The Idea of North*; Nordin, "Metals of Metabolism"; Komu, "Dreams of Treasures".

³³ Nordin, "Metals of Metabolism".

³⁴ Evans and Rydén, *Baltic Iron in the Atlantic World*.

³⁵ Heckscher, *An Economic History of Sweden*.

³⁶ Naum, "Enchantment of the Underground".

economic and symbolic resources ranging from (real and imagined) orebodies to antiques supposedly demonstrating the Arctic origins of all civilization.³⁷

Secondly, although this connection between Arctic tourism and mining may not be self-evident, both are embedded in a sense of, and engagement with, the extraordinary. That Lapland is an enchanted land of magic should be evident by now, but mining sites also resonate closely with mystery and otherworldliness. Places underground have apparently been regarded and experienced as extraordinary since the later Stone Age.³⁸ There is a wealth of historical and contemporary material to indicate that the world underground defies the normal order of things; it is effectively an unfamiliar realm inhabited by non-humans.³⁹ In this view, the Arctic and the world underground are similar, a connection that features later in this paper with regard to Christmas tourism in Rovaniemi.

The Lapland gold rushes from the later nineteenth to the later twentieth century provides further examples of linkages between mining and tourism. Although much smaller in scale, the Lapland gold rushes can be compared to the more famous Alaskan and Californian rushes, and the dreams of wealth boosted an interest in the northern fringes of Europe similarly as they had done several times before. The discoveries of placer gold deposits resulted in the construction of infrastructure in Lapland and that directly and indirectly contributed to and benefited the development of tourism in the region.⁴⁰

Diverse traces of gold prospecting are in evidence in Lapland's landscapes and these are often utilized for the purposes of tourism. Sites of interest include, for instance, the Gold Prospector Museum in Tankavaara, Sodankylä, a place which witnessed one of the Lapland gold rushes in the twentieth century. Intriguingly, the gold deposit in Tankavaara was, according to a well-established story, originally found with the guidance of a spiritual being.⁴¹ The largest gold mine operating in Europe today is also located in Finnish Lapland (Suurikuusikko in Kittilä), but modern large-scale mining and its legacies are not utilized in the context of Lapland tourism. The amethyst quarry in Luosto is the only modern extraction site that is used as a tourist attraction, perhaps because

³⁷ Nordin, "Metals of Metabolism"; Naum, "Between Utopia and Dystopia".

³⁸ Tilley, "The Neolithic Sensory Revolutions"; Herva and Lahelma, *Northern Archaeologies and Cosmologies*.

³⁹ Fors, *The Limits of Matter*; Kroonenberg, *Why Hell Stinks of Sulfur*; Herva and Lahelma, *Northern Archaeologies and Cosmologies*.

⁴⁰ Partanen, *Sankareita, veijareita ja huijareita*.

⁴¹ Launonen and Partanen, *Guide to the Goldfields*.

amethyst as a semi-precious gemstone resonates with the extraordinary character of Lapland and the Arctic; that is, because crystal chambers are special places that fit in with the idea of an enchanted North. The theme of underground wonders comprises a rather surprising contact point between mining and Christmas tourism in Rovaniemi, as will be discussed later.

While Lapland's gold history has not been explicitly associated with Christmas tourism, both resonate with the idea of the far North being a place where dreams can come true, and where reality is intertwined with the extraordinary and fantastic. Moreover, Christmas tourism in Rovaniemi employs the idea of the enchanted underground, as we discuss later. The stories of the supernatural associated with Lapland's gold history⁴² provoke a sense of mysticism around prospecting in a broadly similar manner as Santa Claus with his magical Arctic attributes does. The allure of Lapland gold crystallizes the age-old idea of the North as a place of material and symbolic riches in a modern-world context; gold is an archetypal example of wealth and treasure, almost like dreams materialized. Christmas tourism likewise taps into, and draws from, these northern dreams, imaginaries and fantasies.

Santa Claus and the Arctic: images and marketing

Christmas is generally associated with snowy and cold environments,⁴³ and therefore, Santa Claus and Christmas-related tourism activities have been developed across the circumpolar North, from Fairbanks in Alaska to Salekhard in Yamal-Nenets okrug and Yakutsk in Sakha Republic, Russia, to Gällivare in northern Sweden – not to mention Finnish Lapland.⁴⁴ Arctic elements – such as snow, aurora borealis and reindeer – are integral to the marketing and tourist experiences of Christmas tourism destinations. Santa Claus and his Arctic attributes are widely known around the globe, which makes Santa Claus, in Hall's view,⁴⁵ potentially the strongest brand in the world.

Besides snow, the reindeer has developed into a symbolic animal of the Santa Claus imaginary and folklore, and it has been widely employed in marketing strategies and tourist experiences across Lapland. The reindeer is a semi-domesticated animal that is closely associated with the indigenous

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Rusko et al., "Coopetition, Resource-Based View and Legend".

⁴⁴ Hall, "Santa Claus, Place Branding and Competition".

⁴⁵ Hall, "Santa Claus, Place Branding and Competition"; Hall, "Changement climatique".

Sámi people, although reindeer herding is also practised by ethnic Finns.⁴⁶ The tourism industry portrays the reindeer as a magical animal, as exemplified by the UK-based company, Santa's Lapland,⁴⁷ whose description of the animal on their website blurs the boundary between history and fairy tale. Indeed, on the same webpage, the reindeer is referred to as a magical animal in a poem and to a semi-domesticated animal being intrinsically part of Lapland and the Arctic. A similar example of the magical reindeer is found in the FAQ section of the SantaPark⁴⁸ website where the question is posed: 'How does Santa travel at Christmas?' and SantaPark's storyline goes: 'The answer to how Santa manages to distribute so many gifts in such a short time is one of the world's most closely guarded Santa secrets. We can reveal that the differences in time zones and the speed of Santa's reindeer play a part.' The lore of the reindeer as a special animal has a long historical pedigree that dates back several centuries⁴⁹ and is not an invention of the tourism developers in Finnish Lapland.

The Northern Lights (*aurora borealis*) are another Arctic motif employed by marketers of Christmas tourism. Like the reindeer, *aurora borealis* comprise an important element of the 'mystical' image and experience of the Arctic and the 'Arctic fantasyland',⁵⁰ together with other celestial events, especially the midnight sun in summer and the polar night in the winter. Northern lights have intrigued and puzzled travellers and scholars for centuries – their nature has been discovered only recently – and they do indeed make quite a haunting spectacle in the northern skies.⁵¹ The *aurora borealis* comprise a central tourist attraction and aurora hunting is an important tourist activity in Lapland and elsewhere in high latitudes.⁵² Because the Northern Lights are a rather unpredictable natural phenomenon, however, tour operators cannot guarantee their occurrence and aurora chasing is therefore often combined with other activities, with the possible seeing of the Northern Lights crowning the experience of the magical North.⁵³

⁴⁶ Leu and Müller, "Maintaining Inherited Occupations".

⁴⁷ Santa's Lapland (06 March 2019).

⁴⁸ SantaPark (06 March 2019).

⁴⁹ See e.g. Núñez, "Changing Visions of the Mythical Reindeer".

⁵⁰ Mathisen, "Northern Lights Experiences"; Jóhannesson and Lund, "Aurora Borealis: Choreographies of darkness and light".

⁵¹ See Falck-Ytter et al., *Aurora*.

⁵² Amoamo and Boyd, "Shifting Images"; Bertella, "Photography and Northern Lights Tourism"; Saarinen and Varnajot, "The Arctic in Tourism"; Tervo, "The Operational and Regional Vulnerability".

⁵³ Mathisen, "Northern Lights Experiences".

In Rovaniemi, aurora hunting is coupled with Sámi-related activities, such as ceremonies in a lávvu, visiting a reindeer farm or having ‘traditional’ food, as well as reindeer or husky sleigh rides, snowmobile tours, ice floating and visiting a zoo (in Ranua, 80 km from Rovaniemi) and the Santa Claus Village.⁵⁴ Sámi cultural motifs – such as the shaman drum and dolls wearing ‘Sámi’ clothes – are prominent decorative elements in the setting of the Santa Claus Village and a rich variety of Sámi-inspired souvenirs are available in the shops there (Figures 5-6). The Village also offers husky sleigh rides which have become a common tourist activity in Lapland, apparently because they are ‘Arctic’ in the popular imagination, although there is no historical or cultural background for the use of huskies or husky sleighs in Sámi or Finnish communities. Huskies indeed exemplify the Disneyfication of the European Arctic in a generally similar manner as the Coca-Cola’s Santa Claus figure represents the Disneyfication of Christmas. Imagined traditions and practices and the generic ‘winter wonderland’ imagery employed in Christmas tourism have a myriad of harmful impacts on local communities – as well as the local tourism industry itself – as we discuss in the next sections.

⁵⁴ See Saarinen and Varnajot, “The Arctic in Tourism”.



Figure 5. Dolls dressed in hats and clothes imitating the traditional Sámi headgear and clothes (gákti) for sale in SantaPark.



Figure 6. Imitations of Sámi shaman drums in a souvenir shop in Lapland.

Extracting resources in the enchanted Arctic: a long-term perspective

While Christmas tourism engages with the image of a wondrous and otherworldly Arctic world, it was not originally produced within the modern tourism industry, but is founded on centuries (and indirectly millennia) long imaginaries of the North within (metropolitan) European culture. For ancient Greeks, the far North was Hyperborea, the land ‘beyond the North Wind’, a utopian place inhabited by happy people devoted to the worship of the sun-god Apollo,⁵⁵ while Christianity tended to picture the North in equally otherworldly but otherwise opposite terms as a dark land of Satan and witchcraft.⁵⁶ Although these ancient notions were not associated with the real (geographical) Arctic, they became entangled with the European perception and understanding of the Arctic in the early modern period when the exploration of and engagement with the northern reaches of the continent truly began.⁵⁷ From a metropolitan European – and indeed even southern Scandinavian – perspective, Lapland and Arctic Europe have been, and still are, poorly known and

⁵⁵ Ísleifsson, “Introduction: Imaginations of National Identity and the North”.

⁵⁶ Davidson, *The Idea of North*; Andersson Burnett, “Abode of Satan”.

⁵⁷ See e.g. Byrne, *Geographies of the Romantic North*; Naum, “Between Utopia and Dystopia”; Herva et al. “Alternative Pasts and Colonial Engagements”.

surrounded by an aura of mysticism. Lapland featured as a place of natural and supernatural marvels including strange phenomena, such as aurora borealis and the midnight sun, the ‘exotic’ Sámi people, and diverse (mythical) non-human and spiritual beings. From this perspective, Lapland comprises a ‘natural’ setting for Santa Claus with his elves and magical reindeer, all of which are effectively supernatural, extraordinary beings.

Simultaneously, however, the far North of Europe has always been conceived as a primitive and uncivilized land with real and imagined riches – a resource periphery. Since prehistory, northern lands have provided the European world with amber, a substance with peculiar properties. The amber extracted from the Baltic Sea shores fascinated the ancient Greeks and Romans who specifically associated it with an unknown and mystical far North.⁵⁸ In the Middle Ages, high latitude regions supplied Europe with dried fish and fur, whereas minerals and forest products have been the key resources drawn from the European circumpolar North over the last centuries.⁵⁹ The first mining boom in the region took place already in the seventeenth century and the northernmost parts of Sweden later emerged as a leading mining region in the world, as exemplified by the Kiruna iron ore mine, while the Europe’s largest gold mine, as mentioned earlier, is located in Finnish Lapland. Arctic extractive industries are deeply, even if not always readily obviously, entangled with the age-old imaginaries of the European far North where real and imagined riches and treasures supposedly await.⁶⁰

Resources are culturally and socially constructed; they are products to which certain values are assigned.⁶¹ Gold illustrates this particularly well, as it has been regarded as highly valuable for thousands of years although gold had little ‘practical’ use.⁶² Many Arctic resources are distinctly material, but Lapland has also been a source of intangible resources for centuries. For instance, Lapland provided resources for early modern Swedish antiquarians to make the case that the original homeland of all civilization was traceable to Arctic Sweden.⁶³ Christmas tourism similarly exploits symbolic or intangible resources, and specifically the cultural images and fantasies related to the far North. Tourist operators and tourists themselves ascribe certain values and meanings to

⁵⁸ Ahl, “Amber, Avallon”; Hughes-Brock, “Amber and the Mycenaeans”; Ragazzi, “Amber, a Stone of Sun”.

⁵⁹ Naum, “Between Utopia and Dystopia”; Nordin, “Metals of Metabolism”.

⁶⁰ Komu, “Dreams of Treasures”; Herva and Lahelma, *Northern Archaeology and Cosmology*.

⁶¹ Bridge, “Material Worlds”; Avango et al., “Assessing Arctic Futures”.

⁶² See further Schoenberger, “Why Is Gold Valuable”.

⁶³ Herva et al., “Alternative Pasts and Colonial Engagements”.

the Northern landscape and thus bring them into the domain of touristic consumption, which in turn mediates and manipulates (however subtly and unconsciously), the perceptions and understanding of the Arctic. For example, Saarinen and Varnajot have explored how indigenous Sámi culture is exploited and manipulated for tourism purposes through ‘Arctic Circle crossing ceremonies’.⁶⁴ The extractive practices conducted within the Lapland Christmas tourism industry can potentially have highly negative impacts on local communities although – and dangerously – some of those impacts may be difficult to identify, including the negative impacts on local cultures and ways of life. At the bottom of it, the extraction of cultural fantasies for the purposes of Christmas tourism is problematic because it sustains narrow images of the Arctic and casts them in a stereotypical mould. The extraction of cultural elements for the purposes of Christmas tourism is particularly problematic with regard to the indigenous minority, the Sámi, whose culture is exploited for the benefit of the tourism industry. This exploitation of the Sámi follows a long tradition of Europeans’ fascination with the ‘exotic’ indigenous people, dating back to the later seventeenth century when the first ‘ethnographic’ treatise of the Sámi⁶⁵ was written and widely read in Europe, in part also inspiring European travellers to venture to the exotic far North.⁶⁶

The use of the drum as a decorative element in the Santa Claus Village, for example, represents just the latest stage of its misappropriation. The roots of this particular misuse of the Sámi culture can be found already in the early modern period with Europeans collecting these drums for their museums and destroying them as part of missionary activities in Lapland.⁶⁷ The shaman drum is a powerful symbol of both the Sámi and of colonialism in the European Arctic. Denmark and Sweden have been involved in colonialist ventures since the early modern period and northern Fennoscandia was one target area of colonialist ideas and practices, whose heritage can still be seen today.⁶⁸ Both Christmas tourism and Lapland mining must be understood against this background of how colonialist ideas are continuing to be reproduced through modern ways of perceiving Lapland. Colonialism looms large behind the ambiguous attitudes towards Lapland, including its exoticizing and ‘Othering’, as well as treating it as a resource to be exploited. The Christmas tourism industry in Lapland extracts and employs three kinds of cultural resources: first, local cultures and livelihoods, particularly the indigenous Sámi; second, age-old, deeply-embedded and still powerful

⁶⁴ Saarinen and Varnajot, “The Arctic in tourism.”

⁶⁵ Schefferus, *Lapland*.

⁶⁶ Byrne, *Geographies of the Romantic North*.

⁶⁷ Nordin, and Ojala, “Collecting Sápmi”.

⁶⁸ See further Naum and Nordin, “Introduction”.

European imaginaries of the ‘mystical’ northernmost reaches of the continent; and third, the generic Arctic imagery with little or no connection to the specific realities of the European far North. Seen from this perspective, the Santa Claus figure appears as a white male colonialist and something of a ‘great extractor’ at a time when there is a lot of concern and debate around the negative effects of mass tourism and its exploitive character in many European destinations.

Snow and other illusions: the real, the imaginary and the authentic

Mining tends to be presented as a rational (economic and technological) pursuit, but it is also deeply entangled with fantasies or matters ‘beyond the rational’, as studies in history, folklore and anthropology demonstrates.⁶⁹ These studies show that mines as underground places resonate with ideas and a sense of a non-human world that affords strange experiences, often elusive and illusory in character. Here mines and Christmas tourism are on common ground again: both involve engaging with illusion-like (or magical) dimensions of reality. ‘Ghostly’ experiences in mines encompass visions and peculiar sounds, colours and lights,⁷⁰ which are comparable with the ‘otherworldly’ experience of such natural Arctic phenomena as the Northern Lights, or of an artificial Arctic environment like the entrance of SantaPark, wherein visitors are led through a tunnel with ‘Arctic’ sounds such as wolves howling and snow storms.

Illusions are characteristic to the northern world, as exemplified by ‘the Arctic mirage, refraction of light, creating the appearance of islands, ships or cities where none could actually be.’⁷¹ The play of light, ice, snow and other constituents of Arctic environments create a spectral world. Ice has been a wonder in itself in southern latitudes and rock crystals were thought of as ‘super-ice’ in the ancient world.⁷² Snow, in turn, is central to the wonderland illusion that the Santa Claus Village seeks to produce, and is a key element in an ‘authentic’ magical Lapland in general.⁵⁹

Snow is an exotic substance to many people living outside circumpolar regions and therefore has special marketing potential, but the reliance on snow brings problems with it. First, it profoundly misrepresents the European Arctic as a land of eternal snow and ice, when in fact it has four

⁶⁹ E.g. Hand, “California Miners’ Folklore”; Fors, *The Limits of Matter*; Naum, “Enchantment of the Underground”; Komu, “Dreams of Treasures”; Fløgstad, *Pyramiden*.

⁷⁰ Hand, “California Miners’ Folklore”.

⁷¹ Davidson, *The Idea of North*, 60.

⁷² Davidson, *The Idea of North*.

distinctive seasons, with lush green summers that stand in stark contrast to mid-winter landscapes. Second, snow-winters are predicted to shorten in the coming decades.⁷³ Even today, snow cannot be guaranteed in Rovaniemi in December, which feeds anxiety among the tourist operators expecting a white Christmas and disappointment among tourists because a proper Christmas experience needs snow. For example, during the early winter 2018–2019, British tabloids nicknamed Lapland as ‘Crapland’. According to them, a winter wonderland does not exist without snow, which becomes obvious when visiting the Santa Claus Village during the summer months. The place looks and feels mundane, even slightly absurd with the tarmac and other less charming features visible, but with the loudspeakers still playing Christmas carols. Ironically, this reflects the Arctic realities characterized by extremes and distinctive seasonality, which in the Arctic is usually perceived as an advantage, given the vast range of potential experiences and activities to be offered to tourists.⁷⁴ Nevertheless, in the case of the Christmas tourism industry, the high seasonality intrinsic to the Arctic and in the light of the climate changes becomes harmful.

Whether it is because or despite of building on illusions, Christmas tourism operators in Lapland are eager to emphasize the authenticity of the experience that they provide – while simultaneously compromising it in practice. The Visit Finland website,⁷⁵ for instance, summarizes Lapland with three figures, ‘190,000 reindeers, 749 fells, 1 Santa Claus’. Nevertheless, in Rovaniemi alone, one can meet several ‘official’ Santas in a single day: two at Santa Claus Village and one in SantaPark, not to mention the several other destinations in Lapland offering longer and more private meetings with Santa Claus in, for instance, Kuusamo, Kittilä and Saariselkä. As Hall notes, ‘the fact that there are so many Santa tourism options available in Lapland may even call to question the uniqueness of the Lapland Santa experience’, especially when other ‘travel operators [...] promote holiday packages as being more authentic than those available in Rovaniemi.’⁷⁶

Authenticity is a particularly tricky notion in the context of Santa Claus tourism, given that Santa Claus is ‘is a western cultural product: a simulacrum, a copied image for which no original exists.’⁷⁷ Santa Claus experiences, attractions, sites, settings or products are ex-nihilo tourist constructions, although employing and combining diverse cultural resources from the late antiquity St Nicholas to

⁷³ Hall, “Changement climatique”; Tervo-Kankare et al., “Christmas Tourists’ Perceptions”.

⁷⁴ Hall, “Will Climate Change kill Santa Claus”; Jylhä et al. “Climate Change Projections”.

⁷⁵ Visit Finland (25 February 2019).

⁷⁶ Hall, “Santa Claus, Place Branding and Competition”, 62.

⁷⁷ Pretes, “Postmodern Tourism”, 14.

age-old perceptions of the North. The Santa Claus Village can be regarded as a Disneyfied mass-tourism attraction, whereas smaller enterprises in Lapland are promising ‘more authentic’ experiences. This ‘authenticity’ comes with a price, though, as a more exclusive (and usually 1–2 h long) meeting with Santa can cost anything between EUR 90 and 250 per person.⁷⁸

Crossing boundaries between the worlds

Tourism and mining in the Arctic both involve crossing boundaries between the ‘normal’ world and an ‘otherworld’, venturing into places that are special and different; just like the world beyond the Arctic Circle which has long been considered a place that defies a normal order of things.

Boundaries and crossing them are integral to Christmas tourism in Rovaniemi. The Arctic Circle is significant in this respect, but the boundary between the worlds above and below the surface of the ground is equally, even if less obviously, significant and brings tourism and mining together again. The Arctic Circle is an imaginary line denoting the latitude where the midnight sun and the polar night can be observed continuously for at least 24 hours a year. The Arctic Circle is clearly marked in the Santa Claus Village in Rovaniemi (see Figure 2), but it cannot be directly perceived or experienced due to its intrinsic invisibility. Nonetheless, the Arctic Circle’s crossing has long been invested with cultural meanings.⁷⁹ Indeed, it has emerged as a tourist ritual on its own, with visitors to the site keenly documenting their stepping over the Arctic Circle.⁸⁰ Indeed, both Santa Claus Village and SantaPark enables ‘fixing’ the otherwise elusive Arctic Circle in place and render it as something more tangible.

The same applies to the town of Rovaniemi, which for all practical purposes is located on the Arctic Circle, and thus makes a fitting ‘gateway’ to Lapland and to the Arctic. The special character of Rovaniemi is also expressed materially in such forms as the city’s reindeer-head-and-antler urban plan designed by the world-famous modernist Finnish architect Alvar Aalto. Given this ‘liminal’ location of Rovaniemi on the border of the Arctic, it is curiously fitting that, when Santa Claus tourism really started in the 1980s, British tourists were flown to Rovaniemi on Concorde.

Concorde was an extravagant supersonic passenger plane that could not really make use of its speed

⁷⁸ See Magic of Lapland (27 February 2019); Levi Tourist Office (27 February 2019); Pohjolan Pirtti (27 February 2019); Visit SeaLapland (27 February 2019).

⁷⁹ Nuttall, *Encyclopedia of the Arctic*.

⁸⁰ Grenier, “The Diversity of Polar Tourism”; Timothy, “Collecting Places”; Varnajot, “Walk the Line”.

on European routes, and was mainly operated on cross-Atlantic routes. In other words, Concorde was characteristically a plane suited for going to ‘faraway’ places, travelling between worlds (‘Old’ and ‘New’). In this view, harnessing a Concorde on a voyage to the Arctic seems strangely appropriate: a special vehicle for travelling to a special place, the extraordinary far North.

The cultural notion of the Arctic Circle as a boundary, although invisible, between ‘this world’ and a northern ‘otherworld’ makes this particular line to defy a ‘normal’ order of things, such as the sun not rising or setting at certain times of the year. In the European cultural imagination, the North and northerners have been thought to have a special relationship with the sun since classical antiquity and the turning points of the solar year – the winter and summer solstices – have been culturally significant in many cultures since prehistoric times.⁸¹ Given the universal centrality of the sun and the deep cultural significance of its annual cycle, it is perhaps expected that the Arctic Circle ‘made visible’ in the Santa Claus village appeals to tourists, whether or not (generally probably not) they are even aware of the deep cultural undercurrents of, or reasons for this fascination.

Whatever the specific reasons for it, the Arctic Circle has emerged as a key element in the mystification of the Arctic. Tourism websites and magazines commonly describe the Arctic Circle as a magical line. For example, a brochure widely available in Lapland muses that the Arctic Circle is the ‘gateway to the world of fairy tales and stories’, and ‘that crossing the Arctic Circle might make you younger, and this is the secret to [Santa’s] old age.’⁸² In addition, tourists are advised to take part in ‘Arctic Circle crossing ceremonies’, with a ‘shaman’ leading the ritual and telling stories and legends about Lapland, thus seeking to make the entry to the Arctic a special experience.⁸³

All kinds of boundaries in the landscape, whether natural or human-made, have often had magical and cosmological qualities in pre-modern cultures.⁸⁴ The surface of the ground – the boundary between the ‘ordinary’ world above and the ‘extraordinary’ one below – constitutes one of such culturally significant boundaries around the globe since prehistoric times. For instance, circumpolar cultures have traditionally been characterized by a broadly shamanistic understanding of the world

⁸¹ See e.g. Davidson, *The Idea of North*; Herva and Lahelma, *Northern Archaeology and Cosmology*.

⁸² All About Lapland, p. 30.

⁸³ See Saarinen and Varnajot, “The Arctic in Tourism”.

⁸⁴ See e.g. Knapp and Ashmore, “Archaeological Landscapes”.

– the idea that there are other worlds beyond ‘this world’, with certain places in the landscape and certain practices enabling entering these ‘otherworlds’ that are domains of non-human supernatural beings and powers. Crossing this boundary between the upper world and the world beneath – whether by means of entering natural caves, digging holes or mining – has been deeply meaningful in the circumpolar North since the Neolithic Stone Age.⁸⁵ For thousands of years, the world underground, and what it yields, has been both central to human life and an alien, non-human world subject to fear and fascination.

This theme of the underworld also features in the context of Christmas tourism in Rovaniemi, specifically in SantaPark. SantaPark identifies itself as the only place in the world where it is possible to cross the Arctic Circle underground. Their website⁸⁶ announces that ‘Underneath the Arctic Circle, deep beneath the ground, lies Santa's secret cavern where it's Christmas all year round!’, although the park is actually open only in the two high tourist seasons from late June to mid-August and from mid-November to mid-January. The world beneath the surface of the ground has long-standing associations with the past, the dead, eternity and the non-human. The portrayal of SantaPark resonates with long-term perceptions of the world underground as a magical, timeless place where visitors can ‘Hop on the Magic Train and travel through enchanting worlds’,⁸⁷ not dissimilarly from how the underground mines have been described and experienced during and after mineral exploration.

Conclusion

Today, Christmas tourism represents a well-established industry in Finnish Lapland, particularly in Rovaniemi, and it builds on a mix of ‘exotic’ elements drawn from a temporally layered real and imagined far North, such as the Arctic Circle, the reindeer and the indigenous Sámi. Both Lapland tourism and mining industries draw from centuries old images, imaginaries and fantasies of the European Arctic as a utopian land of the plenty and, at the same time, a primitive resource periphery. This article has shown that both aspects come together in the context of Lapland Christmas tourism. Although this entanglement of the two industries is not readily obvious, we have shown that Christmas tourism and Arctic mining, very different as they may appear from each

⁸⁵ E.g. Herva and Lahelma, *Northern Archaeology and Cosmology*.

⁸⁶ SantaPark (06 March 2019).

⁸⁷ SantaPark (06 March 2019).

other, ultimately share a common ground in terms of the imaginary and symbolic meanings given to the Arctic landscapes and the culture of people inhabiting it, but also in terms of physical and social impacts on the surrounding environment and societies.

On the surface of it, Christmas tourism may appear as harmless fantasy, but a closer look into it reveals a rather different reality and a culture of exploitation. The framing of Santa Claus tourism as a type of extractive industry, as done in this paper, provides an attempt for further critical analysis and understanding of the character of tourism industry in Finnish Lapland from a new angle. More specifically, we have demonstrated that both Christmas tourism and Arctic mining build on age-old cultural and imaginary geographies of the far North. For centuries, Lapland mining has been fed and supported by dreams of riches awaiting in the unknown northern land and Christmas tourism similarly builds on a fantasy steeped in ‘mysteries’, ‘magic’, ‘fairies’ and ‘illusion’,⁸⁸ which is the ground that tourism in Finnish Lapland also builds on. The tourism industry in Rovaniemi and Finnish Lapland promise an authentic Christmas experience, but are deeply entangled with the idea and principles of mass tourism, with Santa Claus emerging as a symbol of mass consumption and stereotypical and even neo(colonial) understanding in an era of consumerism and materialism.⁸⁹

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⁸⁸ See Bridge, “Material worlds”; Avango, et al., “Assessing Arctic Futures”.

⁸⁹ McKay, “Consumption, Coca-Colonization, Cultural Resistance”.

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Figure captions

Figure 1. A Coca-Cola truck exhibited outside a hypermarket in Rovaniemi, December 2018. Photo: author.

Figure 2. A view on the Santa Claus Village in Rovaniemi. The poles with electric lanterns are supposed to mark the Arctic Circle, with Santa's office right beyond the line in the background. Photo: author.

Figure 3. Entrance to SantaPark in Rovaniemi. Photo: author.

Figure 4. Summary of Santa Claus attractions in Rovaniemi.

Figure 5. Dolls dressed in hats and clothes imitating the traditional Sámi headgear and clothes (*gákti*) for sale in SantaPark. Photo: author.

Figure 6. Imitations of Sámi shaman drums in a souvenir shop in Lapland. Photo: author.