

# The hidden power of children in Christmas traditions

## Unveiling the role of secrecy and agency

### Martí Torra-Merín

Martí Torra-Merín is a PhD student in the Social Anthropology Department at the University of Barcelona (UB). His recent work focuses on children's agency and its interplay with secrecy within the fields of Folk Culture and Sexuality Education. He is a member of the Catalan Institute of Anthropology, and GENI Research Group at UB. Email: mtorrame9@doct.ub.edu.

**Fig. 1.** Christmas figures materialize from the mystery thrown upon them.

**Fig. 2.** The Three Wise Men stand still with a veiled visage. Maybe they are just an adult deception, maybe they are something more.

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1. Throughout this text, I talk about the 'existence' and 'non-existence' of such figures in emic terms. To mark this, in all cases, the terms will appear in quotation marks. However, from an etic point of view, considering that they are the product of certain social relations, their existence is evident.

2. Funded by the Department of Culture of the Generalitat de Catalunya (Ref.: CLT051/20/000008) and carried out through the Institut Català d'Antropologia by the following research team: Antonué Gómez León, Marta Rallo Arnau and Martí Torra-Merín.

3. Frekko et al. (2015) show how, in the adoption context, families structure and construct how they communicate specific issues to children, excluding or communicating in a specific way certain information. And this is always under the assumption that one does not have to deceive.

4. Concern in the literature shifted to considering the harm secrecy could do to children. This led Prentice et al. (1978) to conduct a psychological study in which they found that believing in these figures was not traumatic. It was the opposite: having believed in them until an advanced age made children happier adults.

In today's Western cultures, iconic figures such as Santa Claus, the Three Wise Men and the Befana Witch play a magical role in children's Christmas celebrations. These characters share standard features across various societies: they are widely celebrated, often through grand public events, and their 'existence' is made tangible through adult-led performances.<sup>1</sup> During the holiday season, individuals often dress up as these figures or their representatives to gather children's gift wishes. Subsequently, families discreetly place the desired gifts in the home, creating the illusion that these magical beings have delivered them.

In Catalonia, the spotlight is primarily on the Three Wise Men. Originating from the biblical story of the Magi who bestowed gifts upon the infant Jesus, these figures have evolved into universal gift-givers for children. The tradition reaches its peak on the night between 5 and 6 January. Families place the gifts in a designated room on the evening of 5 January, allowing children to discover their presents upon waking the following morning.

Christmas has not been a focal point in anthropology, but it has nonetheless garnered attention through some significant studies. Notably, Miller's work, initially published in 1990 and later updated in 2017, offers an in-depth analysis of the holiday, exploring its historical evolution and manifestations in contemporary societies. According to Miller (2017), his research illuminates the intricate connections between Christmas and three pivotal challenges of modern life: familial and kinship bonds, global citizenship and the complexities of mass consumption and materialism.

While Christmas has been the subject of anthropological study, its iconic figures have yet to be examined, despite their central role in various societies. That said, some seminal works delve into the cultural and symbolic significance of these figures. Lévi-Strauss (1952) explores the symbolic relationships between children and society, focusing on the controversy surrounding Santa Claus in Dijon, France. Miller (1993) delves into the connection between Santa Claus and materialism, offering a symbolic and structural analysis of Santa as a counterpoint to Christ. Lastly, Stronach and Hodgkinson (2011) present a comprehensive overview of Santa Claus's role in Anglo-Saxon cultures.

Surprisingly, there has been limited scholarly focus on the role of children's agency in shaping the holiday and their interactions with these iconic figures. A few notable exceptions include Taussig (1999; 2003a), who briefly touches upon acts of transgression and gift-giving; Busch et al. (2022), who explore children's capacity to question the authenticity of individuals portraying Santa; and Theobald et al. (2018), who examine the process through which children request gifts from Santa. It's worth noting that only the studies by Busch et al. (2022) and Theobald et al. (2018) employ ethnographic research methods.

In anthropology, the study of children's worlds is often sidelined and deemed less relevant than other areas of enquiry. This marginalization extends to the iconic figures associated with childhood, whose 'existence' is often dismissed by adults as mere fabrications staged for the benefit of young recipients. However, as Lévi-Strauss (1952) points out, the primary distinction between these figures and those accepted as 'real' is adult disbelief. Furthermore, these figures contribute to the magic realms where Garlen (2018) argues that we make children reside. Yet this childlike 'innocence' is frequently equated with ignorance or even foolishness, as Cardin



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(1983) argues, undermining the significance of children's roles and experiences.

To explore the role of children in these ritualistic celebrations, we conducted a study in Catalonia primarily from September to December 2020.<sup>2</sup> Our research methods included observational data, informal conversations and 15 in-depth interviews. The study was conducted in a city near Barcelona and a rural village. All collected data were transcribed, analysed and coded. Participation was entirely voluntary, and anonymity was assured. Consent for minors was obtained from both the child and their parents or guardians. Our participant pool was diverse, encompassing children who had recently learned the 'secret' of the holiday, parents who celebrated the occasion at home and young and adult individuals who participated in parades and gift-giving events such as those involving the Three Wise Men and their entourage.

During our research, we discovered that children's agency and awareness played a far more significant role than commonly assumed, especially in their interactions with the concept of secrecy. Drawing on the findings of our study and existing literature, this article will employ Taussig's (1999: 5) idea of 'public secrecy' to shed light on the active role that children have in sustaining the 'existence' of these iconic figures and shaping the celebration itself.

### The unspoken truth

According to Simmel (1906), secrets are foundational in structuring social relationships and shaping perceptions of reality. First, they create criteria for the inclusion and exclusion of groups by differentiating between those who are privy to the information and those who are not. Second,





**Fig. 3.** Santa's elves, as the mythology says, prepare children's presents.

**Fig. 4.** As they ride through the cities with their camels, the Three Wise Men give the presents to children.

5. In a sense, this point would be in line with Taussig (2003b) when he points out the close relationship between scepticism and the symbolic efficacy of magic

- Ariès, P. 1962. *Centuries of childhood: A social history of family life* (trans. R. Baldick). New York: Alfred A. Knopf.
- Barth, F. 1975. *Ritual and knowledge among the Bakatman of New Guinea*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Birchall, C. 2016. Managing secrecy. *International Journal of Communication* 10: 152-163.
- Busch, G. et al. 2022. Young children as theory makers and co-creators of cultural practices: Challenging the authenticity of Santa. *European Early Childhood Education Research Journal* 31(2): 162-177.
- Cardin, A. 1983. Esos lindos angelitos: La infancia seducida, la madurez seductora y viceversa. In *Un cierto psicoanálisis*. Madrid: Libertarias
- Frekko, S.E. et al. 2015. How (not) to talk about adoption: On communicative vigilance in Spain. *American Ethnologist* 42(4): 703-719.
- Garlen, J.C. 2018. Interrogating innocence: 'Childhood' as exclusionary social practice. *Childhood* 26(1): 54-67.
- Huizinga, J. 1980 [1944]. *Homo Ludens: A study of the play-element in culture*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul
- James, A. & A. Prout 1997. *Constructing and reconstructing childhood: Contemporary issues in the sociological study of childhood*. London: Routledge.
- Jones, G.M. 2014. Secrecy. *Annual Review of Anthropology* 43(1): 53-69.

possessing such secret knowledge offers an alternative framework for understanding reality, as the information concealed from specific individuals leads to distinct interpretations of social phenomena.

In the context of these iconic figures, a dual dynamic unfolds: children and adults are differentiated based on their awareness or lack thereof regarding the 'non-existence' of these figures. This knowledge, or the absence of it, shapes a worldview that either includes or excludes elements of magic, at least about this specific issue. Based on differing perceptions of reality, this social structuring operates similarly to the divide between initiates and non-initiates, as Lévi-Strauss noted (1952: 1583). Building on this, and in line with theories that view childhood as a socially constructed life stage (Ariès 1962: part 1; Zelizer 1985), the notion that children occupy subordinate roles – as beings not yet fully civilized, as carriers of *cultural primitivism* (James & Prout 1997: 238) and as possessing a certain 'animality' (Sahlins 2008: 102) – becomes both reified and materialized.

Transparency is highly prized in Western societies shaped by post-Enlightenment values and Judeo-Christian ethics (Birchall 2016: 154). At the same time, deception and secrecy are often viewed as antisocial behaviours that can erode trust (Jones 2014: 54). Within this framework, misleading vulnerable populations, such as children, is considered especially egregious. The prevailing belief is that children, as innocent beings, cannot deceive and have the discernment to anticipate deception from others. However, this perspective doesn't preclude the active management and regulation of the information children are exposed to,<sup>3</sup> particularly if the goal is to maintain their innocence (Garlen 2018: 55).

However, the awareness that these iconic figures are 'fabrications' – created to foster a sense of magic and innocence – often casts this secret in a negative light.<sup>4</sup> This sentiment is echoed by Stronach and Hodkinson (2011: 16), who describe Santa's 'non-existence' as the 'darkest secret', underscoring the negative implications of the term.

### Shifting illusions

Perhaps the notion of deception is not as dark as it seems, especially considering it's a well-crafted, one-sided illusion perpetuated by adults towards children. Research shows that even at a young age, children can maintain secrets. Moore (2015: 27) observes that children as young as four or five can construct secret, parallel play worlds within the school playground right under the watchful eyes of their teachers. Given that children are a socially subordinate group under adult supervision, this behaviour aligns with Scott's (1990) understanding of subaltern-dominant relations. These young individuals demonstrate



their ability to carve out spaces for agency and resistance, thereby confirming that they fully grasp the role of secrecy to evade social control for their own ends (Birchall 2016: 158).

It is rare for young children to be aware that such figures 'don't exist'. However, as they approach pre-adolescence, around 11, it's not uncommon for children to consciously choose not to reveal their newfound knowledge to adults. This became evident during our ethnographic study in a conversation with a 12-year-old girl about the Three Wise Men. Initially, the discussion centred on the gifts she had received and how her family celebrated the holiday. As she grew more comfortable, she eventually disclosed that she knew the Three Wise Men 'didn't exist' and that it was her parents who brought the gifts. At this juncture, her demeanour shifted from cheerful to serious, and she requested that I not share this information with her parents. She was capable of either disclosing or withholding this knowledge, a practice referred to as 'strategic telling' (Manderson et al. 2015: S186).

She carefully evaluated what information to disclose in different contexts based on her interests. With her parents, she feigned ignorance to continue receiving gifts and partaking in the Three Wise Men celebrations. Conversely, in a conversation with the researcher, where the dialogue was more balanced, she presented herself as more mature. This highlights that adults can be misled, and children may not genuinely believe in the Three Wise Men, even if they give the impression that they do.

The most intriguing aspect of this situation emerged when I asked the child if her parents were aware that she knew the secret. She confirmed that they did. Initially, the adults were the deceivers, leading her to believe in the 'existence' of the Three Wise Men. Upon discovering the truth, she feigned ignorance to maintain the illusion, thereby deceiving her parents. Interestingly, she knew her parents knew she was in on the secret. In this complex web, the depth of knowledge becomes irrelevant. What emerges is a continuous layering of awareness, underscoring that the critical element is not the revelation of the hidden truth. Instead, as Barth (1975: 221) articulates, the act of deception itself serves a purpose: it sustains the 'existence' of these figures and, more importantly, shapes the dynamics and interactions between children, adults and the iconic characters.

### Mastering selective ignorance

The concern that uncovering the truth might jeopardize the 'existence' of these figures is essentially an adult perspective. Belief in these characters – specifically the Three Wise Men – isn't necessarily tied to a fragile innocence that could shatter upon revelation. Instead, we encounter



**Fig. 5.** Santa flies with his reindeer Rudolph and a sack full of presents.

**Fig. 6.** A child moves towards Santa's giving hand. Or, maybe it is Santa who receives the grace of materialization through the little one?

**Fig. 7.** Who performs for whom, the gift-givers or the believer?

Lévi-Strauss, C. 1952. Le Père Noël supplicié. *Les Temps Modernes* 77: 1572-1590.

Manderson, L. et al. 2015. On secrecy, disclosure, the public, and the private in anthropology: An introduction to Supplement 12. *Current Anthropology* 52(S12): S183-S190.

Miller, D. 1993. *Unwrapping Christmas*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

— 2017. Christmas. An anthropological lens. *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 7(3): 409-442.

Moore, D. 2015. 'The teacher doesn't know what it is, but she knows where we are': Young children's secret places in early childhood outdoor environments. *International Journal of Play* 1(4): 20-31.

Prentice, N.M. et al. 1978. Imaginary figures of early childhood: Santa Claus, Easter Bunny, and the Tooth Fairy. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry* 48(4): 618-628.

Sahlins, M. 2008. *The Western illusion of human nature*. Chicago: Prickly Paradigm Press.

Scott, J.C. 1990. *Domination and the arts of resistance: Hidden transcripts*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

Simmel, G. 1906. The sociology of secrecy and of secret societies. *American Journal of Sociology* 11(4): 441-498.

Stronach, I. & A. Hodkinson 2011. Towards a theory of Santa: Or, the ghost of Christmas Present. *Anthropology Today* 27(6): 15-19.

Taussig, M. 1999. *Defacement: Public secrecy and the labour of the negative*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

— 2003a. The adult's imagination of the children's imagination. In *Aesthetic subjects* (eds) P.R. Matthews & D. McWhirther. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

— 2003b. Viscerality, faith, and skepticism: Another theory of magic. In *Magic and modernity* (eds) B. Meyer & P. Pels. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Theobald, M. et al. 2018. Socializing children into pop culture: A visit to Santa. *Global Studies of Childhood* 8(3): 252-266.

Zelizer, V. 1985. *Pricing the priceless child: The changing social value of children*. New York: Basic Books.

a variety of scenarios indicating that questioning or revealing the truth about these figures doesn't disrupt the social fabric of the rituals that invoke them; instead, it becomes an integral part of those rituals.

From a young age, children are capable of detecting inconsistencies in the portrayal of these iconic figures. For instance, a study by Busch et al. (2022) involved children aged three to five interacting with a man dressed as Santa Claus. The children, while not doubting the existence of Santa Claus, questioned whether the man in the costume was the 'real' Santa. Similarly, Stronach and Hodkinson (2011: 15) reported an incident in a British school where a priest told the students that Santa Claus didn't exist. When later asked by their teachers about their beliefs, the children asserted that Santa Claus existed, providing various arguments to back their claim. Questioning specific experiences doesn't necessarily undermine the overall idea, nor does the complete revelation of the secret.<sup>5</sup>

The shift from belief is less about a developmental progression in cognitive abilities from childhood to adulthood and more about the social transition between these life stages. Leaving behind the innocence associated with childhood entails recognizing that innocence is a defining feature of being a child. In this developmental perspective, children are often positioned in a nearly pre-social state, akin to what is inaccurately termed 'savages' in humanity (James & Prout 1997: 10). Following this line of thought, a gradual relinquishment of magical beliefs is anticipated as part of the civilizing process. It's therefore not surprising that Lévi-Strauss (1952: 1583) attributed the magic of Santa Claus to the very young. As Taussig (2003a: 459) points out, in Western cultures, adults often leverage children as a conduit to access the realm of magic.

As children come to realize that these figures 'don't exist', marking their initial steps towards adulthood, a significant shift occurs in how they engage with these traditions: the experience transitions from a ritual to a game, as described by Huizinga (1980 [1944]: 5). In simpler terms, the interactions and practices surrounding these figures lose their ritualistic potency for the child and transform into a game that can be shared with adults – assuming, of course, that the child chooses to maintain the façade of innocence.

Ultimately, we find ourselves at the crossroads of two significant public secrets, which Taussig defines as 'what is generally known but cannot be stated' (1999: 267). The first secret is that children aren't necessarily as innocent as perceived. The second is that these iconic figures 'don't exist'. Together, these secrets enable the social and material existence of these characters. By framing children as innocent beings capable of magical thinking and acknowledging internally that these figures are fabrications, adults bring these characters to life through various performances. In this process, they assign the capacity for magical engagement to the youngest among us. Consequently, when children recognize their unique social role as conduits of magic, they exercise agency through 'knowing what not to know' (ibid.: 2): that is, by choosing to remain ignorant of these public secrets. Positioned in this liminal space, where they are privy to both secrets, children's agency is amplified, as they understand not only the expectations placed upon them – to maintain their innocence – but also the deceptive practices of adults.

## Conclusion

Comprehending the essence of Christmas figures in modern childhood requires an understanding of the reciprocal relationship between adults and children. This dynamic is not just about how adults use children's perceptions but also how children, in their own right, exercise agency. Children's ability to navigate, conceal, and



utilize knowledge, along with their unique social position, is crucial for the existence of these figures. Their agency emerges from their understanding of and engagement with the dual public secrets: the nuanced innocence of children and the non-existence of these iconic figures. It's in this complex interplay of knowledge, belief, and societal roles that the magic of these characters is both constructed and maintained. ●