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Relics from the «Lost Valley»: discourses on the magic of masks

Kuhn, Konrad J

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Relics from the ‘Lost Valley’ – Discourses on the Magic of Masks

Abstract: The paper shows how ‘the magic of the mask’ is an important and dynamic narrative strengthening the vitality of rituals and the attention of the public. In the example of the *Tschäggtätü*, carnival masks from the Lötschental region in the Canton of Valais in Switzerland, the paper points to the importance of scientific interpretations for popular discourses on the magic of masks, but also for the formulation of local discourses on the valley and for tourist and self-representative images today. Masks as ‘relics from the old days’ are highly valued objects for fragile community identities in an alpine region.

Key words: carnival masks, discourses on magic, interpretations of folklore studies, popular narratives, Valley of Lötschen, Switzerland, 1900–2014.

Wooden masks exert a profound fascination with their often seemingly archaic appearance. Also the discipline of folklore studies has surrendered to this fascination. Academic interest in wooden masks can be seen through the process of their documentation by scholars of folklore and ethnography from an early point. It can even be said that the focus on wooden masks is approximately as old as the discipline itself. According to this early understanding, masks from the Alps were regarded as typical objects of an anonymous folk culture of rural areas and have been scientifically documented by the early folklore studies. It was the desire for relics of an ‘original state’ of culture, but also for comparability with ethnographic objects from distant parts of the world, that shaped scientific ideas. How strong this desire is still today can be seen in the perpetuated highlighting of the supposed ancient past of the masks, and in the perpetuated discourses of the magic in the mask-rituals. The magic of rituals is thus a permanent trope in narratives on wooden masks, both in local stories as well as in scientific interpretations.

Widely known since their “discovery” by folklorists around 1900 are the wooden carnival masks from the Lötschental region in the Canton of Valais in Switzerland. During the 1930s, they advanced to become part of the repertoire of the national culture of symbols. The magical power of these objects symbolises the valley and the local community to this day, especially since the masks have been carved and sold as tourist souvenirs since in the 1950s.

First, I present the procession of carnival rituals in the Lötschental region and their most important figures, the *Tschäggättä* with their carved masks. Then I will discuss the power of narratives on the origin of these masks that link folk tales to scientific explanations by folklore studies since 1900. Finally, the paper points out to the importance of cultural artefacts for biographic identity constructions as well as for collective representations. It will become clear how various actors are involved in shaping the public image of these masks from the valley. During the nocturnal mask runs, in scientific and popular narratives around the masks as well as in tourist and self-representative images today, ‘the magic of the mask’ is an important concept, fostering the vitality of the ritual and the attention of the public.

1. Tschäggättä – on Masks and the wild Carnival in ‘the Magic Valley’

The carnival in the Catholic valley of Lötschental begins on February 2nd and ends on the night before Ash Wednesday. The *Tschäggättä* are the most famous characters of the Lötschental carnival. The *Tschäggättä* wear carved wooden masks with human features, old inverted dresses and big pelts on their shoulders, which are grotesquely elevated with padding, so as to make their appearance more frightening. They bind a large cowbell around the belly, and wear inside-out woolen gloves on their hands. The mask is between 30 to 50 centimetres in height, made from pine wood, features a fur covering the head and is either painted or blackened with the gas flame. The design of the masks is grotesque and horrific with monster and death elements, disfigured faces and figures reflecting modern influences from Hollywood movies or Hardrock music. While no actual typology exists in the Lötschental masks, there still are two distinct positions among the around 40 active mask carvers in



Figure 1. “Tschäggättä” during their walk through the villages.
Picture: Lötschental Tourism, 2011.

the valley: While one group orients itself more by the traditional masks, the other group is open to influences of *the* current society and incorporates inspirations from Hollywood movies or Hard Rock aesthetics in the design of their masks (Chappaz-Wirthner, Mayor 2009). The name *Tschäggättä* probably comes from the Swiss German dialect word for ‘spotted’, which refers to the black and white sheep and goat skins. The origin of the carnival figure is unknown. While some quote connections to theater performances in the Early Modern Age, others refer to legends of inhabitants of the Valley who undertook nocturnal raids for which they were wearing masks. Restrictions linked to magic indeed still apply for these figures: the *Tschäggättä* are still today not allowed to enter cemeteries or churches and there is a mask ban on Sundays which is very strictly enforced. That the church originally rejected the mask run can also be seen in today’s tales when elderly inhabitants from the valley point out that they have never worn a mask due to their Catholic belief. The mask ritual largely takes place in an unorganised man-

ner. In the evenings and nights of the carnival, individual groups dress up and put on their own masks or borrow masks from carvers. Then they meet up and trek through the valley for hours. Mainly young single men participate in the *Tschäggtätü* run, but nowadays, also women and married men can take part.

Still today, the ritual of the *Tschäggtätü* plays a crucial role for the identity of the majority of the population in the Lötschental and thus constitutes a cultural capital that can be utilised commercially. A key player here is Loetschental tourism, which uses the *Tschäggtätü* in its marketing campaigns where they are attributed a prominent role: carving courses have been offered since 2012, and advertising material talks about the carnival as the “pagan ritual in the magic valley” – the tales about the mysterious origins of the ritual have even become the backbone of the marketing claim for the entire valley. A retrospective look at the history of research around the magical masks of Loetschental shows how much they resort to more than one hundred years old fragments of discourses.

2. National Emblems and Circulations – the Role of Magic in Narratives about the *Tschäggtätü*

It is the masks which have received a lot of attention from various sides for about 120 years (cf. Niederer 1970; Chappaz-Wirthner 1974). Carved masks with human features are widespread in the Alpine region, but also in other parts of Europe or the world. The Lötschental, however, was already visited by folklorists and local historians on the quest for lost original cultural artefacts around the turn of the century to the 20th century. Their search for evidence of mythologies and complex cultural migration theories in the masks (Seeberger 1974: 85–91; Bellwald 1999: 15–17) brought them to name ‘ghosts’ and ‘souls of ancestors’ as the origins of the mask rituals (Stebler 1898; Rütimeyer 1907 and 1916; Meuli 1943 and 1932/1933; Remy 1998). From there, theories were derived that saw the masks as remnants of a shepherd culture, as relicts of ‘pagan origin’ which survived in the “lost valley” (Chappaz 1975) as a cultural retreat area due to its seclusion. The founder of folklore studies in Switzerland, Eduard Hoffmann-Krayer, literally spoke of a “world-deserted valley” (Hoffmann-Krayer 1897: 275). These projections failed to recognise that the Lötschen Valley as a transit

route or as place of origin of mercenaries in foreign military service was in a constant active exchange with its surroundings. This is even more true since the opening of the transalpine Lötschberg tunnel in 1913; it can thus only be spoken of seclusion to a very limited extent. How much the “constraint to the primal” (Jeggler 1992: 620) was effective in the second half of the 20th century, quintessentially proves the text of the priest of the Valley from 1974, in which the masks are said to “have been brought to the Valley from the east by the first inhabitants of the Valley in pre-Christian times, the so-called Alpine people” (Seeberger 1974: 9–10; see also Siegen 1971: 44). The alleged age of the masks and the origin in distant prehistoric times were key arguments in the discourse about the masks. The archaic appearance and the magic emanating from the objects influenced the interpretations in an ahistorical way. Even if the ancient appearance of the masks suggests an older origin, the first certain sign is an explicit ban of the masks in 1865 (Niederer 1970: 282; Seeberger 1974: 86; Bellwald 1999: 21–23). All other backtracking is pure speculation. Nevertheless, the interpretations of the mask rituals as the remnants of ancient mystical rituals exhibit a remarkable stability and persistence. In annual newspaper reports for instance, you can read that the tradition of mask carving had been handed on for centuries in families (Cramer 2010) and in popular books, the *Tschäggtätü* are presented as ghosts emerging from the interior of the earth (Carrera, Grezet 1981: 126).

The interpretations regarding the age and meaning of wooden masks which originally came from outside of the valley are now common among the inhabitants; they consider their masks “as ancient and ‘pagan’, as symbols of fertility and winter expulsion cults or embodied spirits of the dead” (Bellwald 1999: 54). The high virulence of such interpretations indicate that the cultural identity of the inhabitants of the valley is strongly influenced by these discourses – irrespective of the fact that these referrals can barely withstand criticisms from cultural scientists or historians. Such criticism is nowadays even vehemently rejected, like for example in a book of a local historian: “We want to continue to preserve this tradition, as it has been handed down to us. [...] We people from the Lötschen Valley believe in the legacy of our ancestors and can not be misled by science. Even the *Tschäggtätü* are not born after the Big Bang of ethnologists and researchers. This magical gene

was born in the Lötschen Valley and not on their table.” (Bellwald 2013: 496). Here long established hierarchies of knowledge are explicitly rejected on the basis of local interpretations. Seldom it is recognised, how much this local knowledge is based on earlier scientific interpretations.

How much the discourses of origin have become self-representations is visible in the field of popular culture, where the magic of *Tschäggättä* plays an important role. An edition of a French comic book series *Les chemins de Malefosse* (Dermaut, Bardet 1991) is thus set in the medieval Lötschen Valley where a witch and bandits with wooden masks occur. We encounter similar stories on websites and films (cf. Rieder 2002) that deal with the *Tschäggättä*. Here we can find both adherence to the idea of a postulated ancient tradition as well as the invention of new myths (Kuhn 2014). In addition to the new media on the internet, video films on the online platform YouTube play an important role in the dissemination of fragments of stories about the *Tschäggättä*. Most of these films aim to evoke fear and respect of the *Tschäggättä*. In the short film *Lötschägättal* from February 2012 with its spooky-threatening music there are intertitles between the recordings of the mask wearers that report that the *Tschäggättä* protect their valley and dispel evil spirits; and thereby allegedly ‘know no mercy’ (Thöni 2012). Even in the short film *Les Tschägättä, monstres masqués du Lötschental* from 2012, masked figures run down the snowy mountain slopes to professional horror film music and walk by deserted villages beset with fear (Armand 2012). A current film project also plays with the magic of the valley and the mythology around the *Tschäggättä*: a young botanist “undertakes a journey into the unknown at the end of the 19th century [...] But during her journey, the mountain shows its hidden face, the *Tschäggättä*” (Costas 2014). What is striking about these popular culture productions on the masks’ origin is the fact that magic – in different forms – always plays a major role. And these productions continue to shape the interpretations about the *Tschäggättä* in the public and the valley alike.

3. Objects for the Identity of a Mountain Valley

Since the 1940s, the manifold interpretations of the masks in the valley has been joined by an increased interest from the outside.

This interest is no longer primarily scientific and ethnographic, but also attributes the masks an emblematic function (Antonietti 2011: 18) which can be used by the tourism industry. This is how a market for souvenir masks emerged in the 1950s. The carvers were thus confronted with new requirements to which they reacted flexibly: the masks were increasingly standardised and miniaturised which turned big masks for wearing into small souvenir masks for the hanging up on the wall. Also, the masks were no longer carved individually, but blanks were created, and the work stages were broken down so that they could partially be passed on to wholesale buyers for further processing. Sometimes, copy milling was also used, which made it possible to produce a number of identical masks. In order to still add the aura of handwork to the masks, the blanks prefabricated by machine were subsequently carved manually. In addition to this rationalisation in the proto-industrial production, there is also evidence of aesthetic changes, which made the masks increasingly uniform. Only with these processes of change in the production of this cultural object could the wooden masks of the Lötschen Valley now also be produced and sold as regionalised ‘masks from the Valais’ in far away valleys.

Connected with this highly charged repertoire of symbolic capital, an actual image program was created that is also known from other similar visually attractive rituals, such as the Bavarian-Austrian *Krampus* or *Fastnacht* in southern Germany: *Tschäggättä* masks adorned stamps of the Swiss Post as of 1977 and the poster campaign of 2009, which was launched after the opening of the Lötschberg base tunnel. The executive advertising agency used masks from local collections and played ironically with the strong myths of origin but also with the existing regional stereotypes by promoting the slogan: ‘Discover earthy peoples’.

The fact that this description was not only well received by the population of the valley itself shows that there are competing interpretations of what a mask from the Lötschen Valley is. It is not only the population of the valley who formulates interpretations though, but also external perceptions with a long tradition. Even if other players are involved now in this archaising representation, the local carvers fight to keep their position in the establishment of the image of the *Tschäggättä* by constantly expanding, negotiating

and debating the boundaries of what constitutes a ‘real’ mask from the Lötschen Valley. One can find hierarchies within the valley community, which manifests in highly competitive positions of power regarding contact with the various media. A few carvers consciously occupy an active role in the representation of the mask ritual and act as actual gate-keepers. They are protagonists in reports, have their own websites, advise film teams and represent with their masks the whole ritual on an iconographic level.

4. The Magic of Masks as a dynamic Narrative

The mythicising ritual interpretations in the case of the wooden masks from Lötschen Valles are of an impressive concision and date far back historically. In these circulating discourses, magic and the mysterious origin of the masks in a dark and distant past constantly appear. This is due to the early academic interpretations of the ritual. What is interesting is the fact that these interpretations were further supported by the population of the valley and the mask carvers since about the middle of the 20th century. It can thus not simply be assumed that these are interpretations that found their way back to the valley and transformed the masks into an ideologically fixed ritual, but rather, we encounter autonomous adaptations and developments that are negotiated and represented in different forums and appear in ever new variations. This self-representation thus establishes distinctive relationships with older narratives in which the magic of the masks and the theories of pagan origin figure as central arguments for the collective identity of the valley. One possible way of dealing with this alleged magic of the masks are the ongoing negotiations about the aesthetics of the masks. People are constantly trying to define how a real *Tschägättä* has to behave and look and where the boundaries of these wild figures could be drawn (Chappaz-Wirthner 2010). These limits are even more contested, precisely because there are no organising carnival societies, no formalised mask types or set props.

A different approach to the narrative traditions of the ‘magic’ is the partially ironic twist of the strong need for myths. This need is being addressed in a creative and innovative way and thus unmasks not only magical claims, but it also points to a remarkable vitality of the ritual and the associated masks. The masks thus illustrate ne-

gotiation processes for fragile community identities in alpine border regions. The narratives about magical masks refer to ambivalences between autonomous capacity of acting and passive representation that are highly relevant to the field of cultural studies.

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THE RITUAL YEAR 10

MAGIC IN RITUALS AND RITUALS IN MAGIC

Edited by
Tatiana Minniyakhmetova and Kamila Velkoborská

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