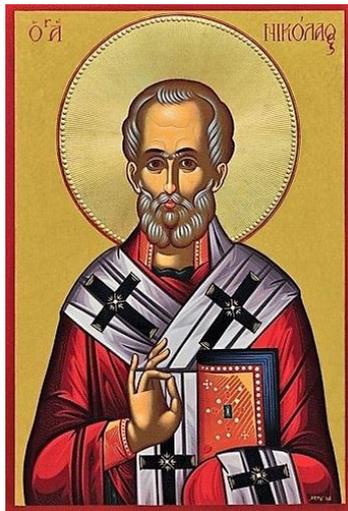


BYRON RANGIWAI

## Hana Kōkō: What's Wrong with Nelson's Māori Santa?

I was born in 1980. I grew up with Santa. He delivered gifts to our home until the day that I stopped believing and realised that my parents were behind the whole thing. They were, of course, commissioned by the jolly man himself, to procure, wrap, and hide the Christmas gifts until the Baby Jesus popped open the bubbly (or fizzy). The origins of Santa Claus are said to point to Saint Nicholas of Myra, an early Christian bishop during the time of the Roman Empire (Seal, 2006; Wheeler, 2010).

**Image 1: Greek Orthodox Icon of Saint Nicholas of Myra**



**(Iconography by the Monks of Mount Athos, Greece)**

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Santa is seen, by some, as the Americanisation of a Catholic saint (Siefker, 2006) originating with Sinterklass – the Dutch name for Saint Nicholas – imported to America with Dutch settlers (Copeman, 2005).

**Image 2: Sinterklass with “assistants” in blackface**



**(Droeven & Brinckman, 2015, n.p.; photograph by BELG)**

For Siefker (2006) Santa:

...is the one of the last descendants of a long line of dark, sooty, hair-covered men, the remnant of a pre-Christian god of awesome power. ...throughout the millennia this figure evolved in many ways and in many lands, adapting to new roles as society changed... (Siefker, 2006, pp. 5-6).

Furthermore, Santa's religio-cultural genealogy has its roots in one powerful being:

...a priest to some, a god to others, and the personification of evil to still others. Originally a beast-

god who reminded people of the cyclical nature of the world, of death and rebirth, this Wild Man was part of fertility performances throughout Europe. He was a godhead so strong, so universally worshipped by “pagans”, that Christianity found him the major impediment to its goal of European salvation.

[Santa]...the old god – a fertility deity whose worship covered Europe – travelled two paths into the twentieth century. On one path, he came to personify evil for the growing Christian church. On the other, he became the symbol of holiday, carnival, and new hope. From these two paths, he arrived at both the warmth of our fireplace and in the flames of hell (Siefker, 2006, p. 6).

McCullough (2014) argues:

While Saint Nicholas forms the basis for the modern character of Santa Claus, and a more or less direct line can be drawn from one to the other, many other ancient traditions have also been incorporated into the legend. Probably the most important influence on the modern Santa Claus apart from Saint Nicholas is the ancient Norse god Odin. Usually depicted as an old, one-eyed man with a long beard, Odin often appeared on Earth dressed in old robes and a hood. In this guise he interfered with the lives of mortal men, granting gifts and favors but also bringing doom and curses. [He] ...maintained a watch over the nine worlds, including the world of the elves (McCullough, 2014, p. 44).

The image of Santa Claus that is “worshipped” and adored today was created and shaped by Coca-Cola. Throughout the 1920s, a stern-faced Santa featured in Coca-Cola advertisements (Coca-Cola Journey, n.d.). The illustrator Haddon Sundblom was commissioned by the company to develop an image of Santa that was “...warm, friendly,

pleasantly plump and human..." (Coca-Cola Journey, n.d., n.p.) which debuted in Coca-Cola advertisements in 1931.

**Image 3: "My hats off to the pause that refreshes."**



**(Coca-Cola Journey, n.d., n.p.)**

Before the advent of the "Coca-Cola Santa", he was "...depicted as everything from a tall, gaunt man to a spooky-looking elf. He has donned a bishop's robe and a Norse huntsman's animal skin" (Coca-Cola Journey, n.d., n.p.). Indeed, Santa has appeared in many different forms in many different cultures, at many different times throughout history. Santa is not exclusively and permanently in his Coca-Cola form but may be seen, still, in many forms around the world.

On Sunday 2 December 2018, the Nelson Santa Parade featured a Māori Santa. The absence of a jolly white man dressed in red

and white reportedly shocked observers as this very Māori Santa, Robert Herewini, rode through Nelson adorned in a contemporary red kākahu (erroneously described in the media as a korowai).

**Image 4: Nelson's Māori Santa, Robert Herewini**



**(Newman, 2018; photograph by Braden Fastier)**

Gooch (2018) describes Nelson's Santa Parade in the following way:

Nelson's Santa parade has taken a bi-cultural approach, but it caused confusion among some of Santa's young fans.

The white-bearded, jolly man was replaced in Sunday's parade by a Māori man representing Santa Claus.

The sleigh led by Santa's reindeer was ridden down Trafalgar St with the merry elves, but Santa's traditional suit was ditched for a red korowai (Māori cloak), worn by Robert Herewini (n.p.).

**Image 4: Robert Herewini, the Māori Santa, riding on his sleigh**



**(Newman, 2018; photograph by Braden Fastier)**

The materialisation of a Māori Santa caused what I would term “typical responses” from New Zealanders. One concerned father asked himself how he would explain to his daughter that “**that** man was coming down the chimney on Christmas Eve” (cited in Gooch, 2018, n.p., emphasis added), suggesting, perhaps, that the brown Santa would be breaking and entering rather than delivering gifts. However, rather than trawl through the social media diatribes surrounding Nelson’s Māori Santa, AM Show host, Duncan Garner’s responses, in my view, represent the general feeling of those who oppose the Māori Santa.

Accusing Nelson of ruining Santa with a PC attempt at being culturally diverse, Duncan Garner, on his AM Show declared that “Māori don’t have to own everything” (Palmer, 2018a, n.p.). He asked questions such as: “Who was the person behind this? Who was the person who decided that the Māori Santa, Mr Herewini, was the right man to be the Santa?” (Palmer, 2018a, n.p.). He also made the following comments: “You need to have a beard to have Santa, you need to have a Santa suit on. And sorry, turning up with a korowai? You got this so wrong, Nelson.

You couldn't have been more wrong. The kids weren't there to see a Māori Santa. Santa's very different to Māori - Māori don't have to own everything. Santa is Santa, and Santa's not broken" (Palmer, 2018a, n.p.). Garner's views have reportedly been backed up by observers who complained that the absence of the "traditional" Santa caused some children to become visibly upset, some bursting into tears (Palmer, 2018a). Garner maintained that "[t]he kids are looking for Santa. It's not Waitangi Day, Santa is okay still as a fat white guy with a beard. Some things don't have to change" (Palmer, 2018a, n.p.).

Santa is many things to many people. Throughout history he has appeared in as many forms as there are cultural lenses. He was once a Norse god. He was once an early Christian bishop in what is now modern-day Turkey. He was once a Catholic saint. He was once a Coca-Cola advertising icon. So what's the problem with having a Māori Santa? Advertising expert Vaughn Davis thought the Māori Santa was "cool" stating that "[i]f baby Jesus can be white, which is a bit weird when you think about it, Santa can be brown" (Palmer, 2018b, n.p.). Davis also comments that Aotearoa New Zealand is "...an evolving country. We're not in the northern hemisphere, it's not winter. Santa doesn't need to dress for a blizzard" (Palmer, 2018b, n.p.). The English had Father Christmas, the Dutch, Sinterklass, and Māori have Hana Kōkō. All of these identities have evolved from something else. Although Hana Kōkō (basically a Māori version of the man in the red suit) is one of most recent reincarnations of Santa, Nelson's Māori Santa may be the first in an emerging trend of bi-cultural and multi-cultural Santa characters to come, for just as Santa has changed over the millennia, so too will he, or perhaps even she/them, evolve in the future.

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