

Easter Witches in Sweden

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On October 3, 1747, the farmhand Jonas Andersson was brought before court in Husby parish in Uppland, Sweden. He was accused of calling the maid Anna Olofsdotter a “*trollpacka*” (approx. “sorceress”). The background of the matter was that some children of the parish had earlier found a type of slimy mould called *trollsmör* (lit. witch butter; in Latin: *Fuligo septica*), which was popularly connected to witches and witchcraft. Together with the children, Jonas had made a fire out of some dry sprigs of wood. They then threw the fungus into the fire with the purpose of forcing the supposed sorceress that was thought to be the cause of the “witch butter” to reveal herself in front of everybody’s eyes. Anna Olofsdotter had observed all of this, and decided to play a joke on the children. She rapidly changed her dress, put an apron over her shoulders and drew her hair in front of her eyes, in order to avoid being recognised and to look like a witch. She then ran out at the children, shouting: “det swider, det swider” (It burns! It burns!). The children were terrified because they thought that a real witch had appeared, and quickly ran away. The farmhand Jonas must have also been scared, because he started spreading a rumour about how Anna really was a witch. The case was raised at the district court and later also at the Svea *hovrätt* (Court of Appeal). In the end, the farmhand was sentenced to four days’ imprisonment on bread and water for spreading the rumour.¹

If the events described above had taken place in the western instead of the eastern parts of Sweden, Anna would probably had been called a “*påskkäring*” (approx. Easter witch or Easter hag) instead of a *trollpacka*. In the middle of the nineteenth century, at least, *påskkäring* was the prevalent name used in these parts for those who were supposed to know witchcraft and visit Black Sabbaths along with with the Devil (Ejdestam 1939: 27–30). The name is derived from the belief that witches were especially active during Easter. Nowadays in Sweden, *påskkäring* is also the most common name to be applied to those young children who dress up as witches and wander the streets on Maundy Thursday, or Easter Saturday. My intention in this article is to examine this particular disguise (or mumming) tradition.

Of course, the aforementioned attempt by the maid Anna to look like a witch has little to do with the fact that children nowadays dress up or disguise

¹ ULA: KLHA VIII AI: 4, Court in Husby, October 3, 1747; and ULA: County Administrative Board of Kopparberg, County Secretariat DII: 58, letter from the Svea *hovrätt* to the County Governor of Kopparberg, February 27, 1748.

themselves as witches. However, the case indicates at least that the possibility (albeit not always an entirely successful one) existed of people joking about or trying to imitate witches in Sweden at a time when the belief in witchcraft was still very much alive (cf. Östling 2002: 158–160). The similarities and differences between the “real witches” and the disguised and/ or costumed children is something that has received very little examination. However, several theories concerning the *påskkäring* tradition, its origin, distribution and age have appeared over time, primarily in general surveys of Swedish calendar customs. Usually scholars have claimed that an important condition for the origin of this tradition must have been that the belief in witches and witchcraft was no longer common or widespread in Sweden. For the same reason, Albert Eskeröd, among others, supposed that the tradition probably originated in cities, places where he thought the belief in witches would have been most likely to fade away first. Other scholars have presented more specific theories. Some Swedish folklorists, for example, have suggested that the custom probably arose in the suburbs of Stockholm during the first part of the twentieth century. Thus, in the words of Albert Eskeröd, the custom is considered to represent “en dyning i skämtets form av den gamla och vilt svallande häxtron” (light, humorous echoes of the old, serious and prevalent belief in witches).²

My intention in this paper is not to write the Swedish history of the *påskkäringar* (pl.).³ Instead, I mean to focus on the origin and spread of the custom as it existed in the nineteenth century. Using earlier folklore records, I will attempt to illustrate the connections between the belief in witches, those narratives about them, and the custom of dressing up as witches. My point of departure is the belief in witchcraft and witches in Sweden.

Blåkulla and the “Easter Witches”

As far as one can see, there has always been a belief in magic in the Nordic countries. *Maleficium* (referring to Black Magic) is often mentioned in the earliest written sources (Ankarloo 1987: 248). Before that, both the early Icelandic poem *Hávamál* (st. 155) and one of the Swedish national law codes, *Västgötalagen*, mention flying witches.⁴ At the end of the sixteenth century, a new kind of more religiously marked form of witch trial arose, both in Sweden and in other neighbouring countries. At that time, the witches’ participation in Black Sabbaths and their pacts with the Devil became the dominant form of accusation (see Ankarloo 1971: 48–49; and 1987: 252).

Entering into a pact with the Devil was regarded as a direct attack on God,

² Eskeröd 1953: 56; Aarsrud 1988: 43; Bringéus 1976: 134–135; and 1999: 50; and Ronström 1988: 79–82.

³ In another article about the *påskkäringar*, I have discussed the change in the mumming tradition between the middle of the nineteenth century and the end of the twentieth: see Skott 2002b.

⁴ See *Eddadigte* I, 1964: 38; Holmbäck and Wessén 1946: 110 and 126; and Sahlgren 1915: 25.

and consequently such beliefs contributed to the mobilisation of the church and the state against witchcraft. Those assumed to be witches were thought to be part of a larger conspiracy, which was regarded as a threat to the kingdom itself. For this reason, the courts also began to search actively for fellow criminals associated with the “witches”. The trials became a near epidemic, resulting in a very large number of persons being suspected of witchcraft. During the great Swedish witch craze of the 1660s and 1670s, several thousand people were tried, and a couple of hundred executed for these imagined crimes. From the end of the seventeenth century, however, the number of trials involving accusations of attendance at a witches’ Sabbath gradually decreased, coming to a near end at the beginning of the eighteenth century. From regarding the legends of the witches’ Sabbaths as accounts of real events, the courts gradually began to consider them as the work of illusions inspired by the Devil, or simply hallucinations suffered by those accused. The last execution took place in 1704. However, it was not until 1779 that the death sentence for witchcraft in Sweden was eventually repealed.⁵

There are obvious close points of similarity between the main parts of those narratives that deal with witches participating in the Black Sabbaths. In Sweden, the witches’ Sabbaths were often thought to occur at a place called Blåkulla (the equivalent of Brockenberg in German legends), which is often described as a mountain or a house. Witches were then thought to fly to Blåkulla on brooms, poles, cattle or even humans. Their means of transport were supposed to be greased with a kind of ointment stored in a horn which the witches acquired directly from the Devil. The journey from their homes was often thought to begin with the uttering of a charm, and to take place via travel through chimneys or keyholes. Once they reached their destination, the witches were believed to hand over gifts like edible objects or even living children to Satan or his wife. Most things that happen at Blåkulla are the opposite to the way in which they occur in the real world, and often centre around a feast or a wedding (Ankarloo 1971:217–223; and Skott 1999). In Sweden, the journey was often thought to take place at Easter, and it was this that resulted in the witches being called *påskkåringar* (Easter witches) in the western parts of Sweden.⁶

Despite the change in the ideas held by the authorities about narratives dealing with the witches’ journeys to Blåkulla during the late seventeenth century, beliefs in witches as well as Blåkulla survived amongst a large part of the population. Some relatively extensive witchcraft trials still took place during the eighteenth century, for example, in Värmland during the 1720s; in Dalarna in the 1760s; and in Dalsland in the 1770s (Aarsrud 1988: 25; and Skott 1999).

⁵ See Ankarloo 1971, and 1987; Oja 1999; and Skott 1999.

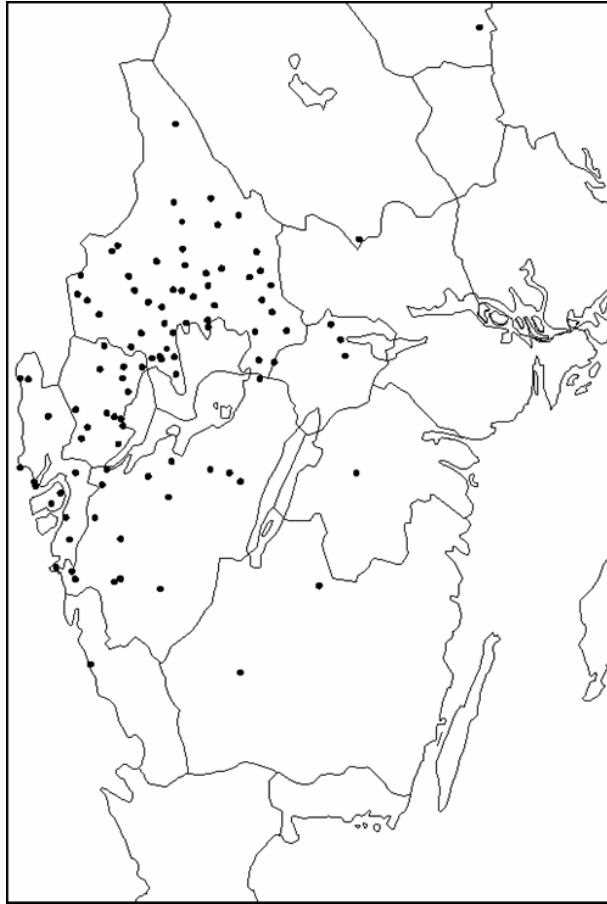
⁶ For translations of legends showing this belief, see, for example, Kvideland and Sehmsdorf 1988: 183–184; and Lindow 1978: 163–176. In print, the word *påskkåring* first appears in 1807 in a dictionary (SAOB 1898–: 2901). Per-Anders Östling (2002: 152, note 268) has discovered the word in a court record from 1771. He also thinks that *påskkåring* is probably a *noa*-word for a witch.

Even as late as in the 1850s, rumours about journeys to the Devil's Sabbath were still flourishing in Dalarna. These rumours led to the appointment of a commission which was given the task of investigating "de vidskepliga företeelserna" (the superstitious phenomena). Admittedly the commission cleared everybody of suspicion in this case. However, it is obvious that the major part of the population in this area still believed that the Devil's Sabbaths really took place (see Wall 1987). Indeed, trials containing accusations about superstitions and black magic are even known to have occurred in the nineteenth century. For example, a woman in the parish of Ör in Dalsland was warned about making use of prophecies and witchcraft in 1864 (Aarsrud 1988: 26).

Even though the general belief in magic and Blåkulla went on gradually fading away, even in the middle of the nineteenth century we still find countless records in the Swedish folklore archives showing how (primarily) older people in the countryside still believed in Blåkulla and witches. For example, the folklore collections contain many narratives about how people would hide brooms so that they could not be used as a means of transport to Blåkulla; how they lit *påskeldar* (Easter fires); and how they would fire guns to frighten the witches, or paint crosses on the doors to their cow-houses so that the "real" witches would not harm the cows, and so on. Records in which the informants themselves claim to have actually caught sight of witches are not especially rare. Moreover, narratives recorded in the beginning of the twentieth century about "real" witches and their activities are still relatively numerous. Indeed, Per-Anders Östling (2002: 319) goes as far as claiming that almost every motif from the era of the witchcraft trials can be found in the later folklore collections. In short, he is implying that the oral tradition about witches in Sweden was extremely stable and conservative.

In spite of its religious seriousness, Easter in Sweden was full of jokes. At some time (according to earlier scholars, only when the belief in witches was no longer widespread), a number of playful customs connected to the witches and their attributes came into being. In parts of southern and middle of Sweden, dolls and effigies which were supposed to represent witches could be put outside houses in order to play jokes on or frighten the inhabitants.⁷ In some parts of Sweden, another common custom was to hang witches' attributes made out of paper and other materials on other people's backs as a joke (Skott 2002b: 190–191). It was probably also during the nineteenth century that the custom of dressing up or disguising as *påskkäringar* originated. If we consider distribution maps based on excerpts from older folklore records, it is obvious that the tradition was already common in large parts of western Sweden during the latter part of the nineteenth century (see **map 12.1**, cf. **map 2.9**).

⁷ On such effigies, see further the articles by Christine Eike and Nils-Arvid Bringéus, as well as the Surveys of Masks and Mumming Traditions in Sweden, Norway and Denmark elsewhere in this volume.



Map 12.1: Distribution of the custom of people dressing up or disguising themselves as *påskkäringar* (Easter witches) in Sweden during the nineteenth century. (Map: Fredrik Skott.)

Easter Witches in the Nineteenth Century

Altogether there are about one hundred folklore records, mainly from western Sweden, dealing with the custom of people dressing up or disguising themselves as *påskkäringar* during the nineteenth century. According to these records, the mumming tradition almost always took place on Easter Saturday, and involved both males and females. In those cases where the participants of the tradition are described as dressing up as female figures, they were referred to as *påskkäringar*. Male figures, on the other hand, were sometimes referred to as *påsktroll* or *påskgubbar* (Easter trolls: see **fig. 2.14**). The mummers are often described as being older children or youths. In a few records they are said to be older youths or even adults.

The participants' appearance also varied. According to the extant folklore records, they often attempted to look like "real" witches (see **figs 2.13, 12.1 and 12.2**; cf. **fig. 5.13**). Thus, they dressed up as old peasant women with long skirts and scarves. Their clothes are normally described as being old or ragged.



Fig. 12.1 *Påskkäringar* (Easter witches) in Varberg, Halland, Sweden, in 1916. (Photo: Mathilda Ranch.) (Courtesy of *Länsmuseet Varberg*.)

The *påskkäringar* would also often paint their faces with soot to avoid being recognised. In other cases, the participants would wear a so-called *skåpukan-sikte* (mask). These masks are described in very similar terms to those used for other Swedish disguise traditions. They might be made, for example, of cloth, paper or, in later times, of *papier mâché*, with hair, a beard and eyebrows made of moss (cf. Aarsrud 1988: 8–9). Most probably a person could use the same mask when dressing up as a *påskkäring* and/ or for a *Lucia* or *Knut* tradition.⁸ Factory-made masks were not available in the cities until the beginning of the twentieth century (Anon 1895: 7). As has been pointed out earlier, the masks were primarily used to avoid being recognised. However, it is also possible that the *påskkäringar* used masks to add further to their appearance as “real” witches, which were, of course, considered to be ugly and frightening.

The fact that the participants’ clothes are normally described as being “old or ragged” offers further close similarities with the *Knut*, *Lucia* or Shrove Tuesday mumming traditions in Sweden,⁹ all of which often involved some degree of cross-dressing. In their attempts to imitate “real” witches, those in costume would also bring along brooms or poles (see **fig. 12.2**), which, among other things, were also believed to serve the “real” witches as a means of transport. As noted above, according to the witch legends, they would also use a

⁸ See further the Survey of Masks and Mumming Traditions in Sweden elsewhere in this volume.

⁹ See further the Survey of Masks and Mumming Traditions in Sweden elsewhere in this volume.



Fig. 12.2: *Påskkäringar* in Karlstad, Värmland, Sweden, in 1946. (Photo: Helge Kjellin.) (Courtesy of Värmlands museum.)

form of ointment stored in a horn, which gave them the power of flight. For this reason, the mummers would sometimes also bring along horns with them. In addition to this, the folklore records indicate that the mummers sometimes carried coffee pots with them (see **fig. 2.13**), once again items that seem to have been associated with witches from the nineteenth century onwards. It might be argued that the coffee pot symbolises the provisions that, according to the legends, the witches brought with them to Blåkulla as gifts for the Devil or his wife. It is also possible that the coffee pot symbolises the feast that is described in several legends about the witches' Sabbath (Ankarloo 1971: 221; and Skott 1999: 117). However, it might also have had a practical purpose: when the mummers were given gifts, it is possible that they used the pot to store the received offerings. In addition to this, there are a few cases in which the mummers are actually said to have dressed themselves as the Devil, placing horns on their heads and knees (IFGH 2637: 34; and IFGH 2469: 18–20).

During the nineteenth century, the *påskkäringar* commonly used to distribute or throw so-called *påskbrev* (Easter letters), consisting of painted and folded drawings. They were most often homemade, but, as early as in the 1890s, could be bought ready-made in certain stationer's shops (see *ÅP* 1889; and *Ödman* 1887: 63–64). Common subjects of the letters were witches, eggs and other things connected with Easter. The letter usually contained a verse addressed to "*påsktrollet*" (the Easter troll) or something of the kind. These

verses varied but were often formulated as invitations to people to participate in the witches' Sabbath at Blåkulla, as in the following examples:

Sopa, raka jag nu sänder,
tag den uti dina händer.
Rider du fort,
så kommer du fort,
till Blåkulla port!

(I send you a broom, a rake;/ take it in your hands./ Ride fast,/ and you will soon reach/ the gate of Blåkulla.)

Sopa, raka, smörjehorn,
sänder jag dig till resedon.
Far fort min vän,
kom snart igen!
Det önskas av en trogen vän! (IFGH 5628: 34; and Ödman 1887: 63–64.)

(Broom, rake and ointment horn/ I send you for your trip./ Go fast, my friend,/ come back soon!/ This is the wish of a loyal friend!)

Ideally, the letter should be delivered anonymously. The mummers would therefore commonly open the outer door of a house they were visiting and throw the letter in. Immediately afterwards, the *påskkäring* would run away, trying not to get caught by the inhabitants of the house. It is worth underlining, therefore, that those who threw *påskbrev* usually did not enter the houses. Nor did they beg or collect anything, unlike most of the participants in other traditional Swedish disguise traditions.¹⁰ Kristina Olsson, born 1849 in Stora Kil, Värmland, told a folklore collector about how *påskbrev* were delivered when she was young:

På påskkvällen klädde de ut sig "bedrövligt". Då voro de unga ute och sprang "påskkäring" och "påskgubbe". Ett par stycken gick ut i sällskap men så träffade de ihop med andra, så att de till slut kunde bli ett helt böke. De förvrängde rösten och hade alla slags läten. Den ene kunde komma dragande med en sopkvast mellan benen, en annan hade en stör o.s.v. Kvinnorna voro utklädda till karlar och karlarna till kvinnor. Somliga hade skrudat ut sig i kalvskinn, andra i fårskinn. Man hade klippt sönder ett skinn, så att det passade för ansiktet med hål för mun och ögon. Så kanske man hade satt fast ett par horn över huvudet. Ja, de voro så "utspökade" så att de kunde ha skrämt vetet av människor. De höllo på från gård till gård. Så hade de påskbrev med sig, som de kastade in i farstun. Med detsamma de hade kastat från sig påskbrevet slog de ett kraftigt slag i dörren eller i väggen. Ju större "rammel" de kunde åstadkomma, ju bättre var det. När de hade väsnats ett slag, sprang de så mycket de orkade därifrån. Det var inte meningen att någon skulle få fatt på dem. Men man sökte få fatt i dem och förföljde dem långa stycken. Lyckades det, så blev det ju skämt och roligt. Jag minns några utklädda flickor som hade sökt rädda sig undan förföljelse i en präsm. De förföljande hade upptäckt flickorna och sköt utan vidare ut präsmen i vattnet. Där stod nu flickorna hjälplösa emedan de inte hade åror eller något

¹⁰ Once again, it is worth comparing the behaviour here to that connected with the throwing of straw images into farms: see further the article by Nils-Arvid Bringéus elsewhere in this volume, and the Surveys of Masks and Mumming Traditions in Denmark, Norway and Sweden elsewhere in this volume.

att hjälpa sig fram med. Där fick de stå i timmar innan man kom och räddade dem. Sådana där utklädda tyckte man, att man kunde hantera hur som helst, om man lyckades få tag i dem (Stora Kil, Värmland: IFGH 2469: 18–20).

(On the evening of Easter Eve, they dressed up in awful clothes. Then the young ones were out as “Easter witches” and “Easter trolls”. A few would go out in each party but then they met others so that in the end they could become a large group. They distorted their voices and made all kinds of noise. One would drag a broom between his legs; another had a pole, etc. The women were dressed up as men and the men as women. Some wore calf skins and others wore sheepskin. They had cut out the skin so it fitted their faces with holes in front of the mouth and eyes. Then one might have a pair of horns stuck above his head. They were so “spookily dressed up” that they could have frightened people to death. They walked to one house after another. They brought along “Easter letters” which they threw into the halls. The moment they had thrown in the “Easter letters”, they would powerfully bang on the door or a wall. The louder the “crash” they could make, the better. When they had made noises for a while, they ran away as fast as they could. People weren’t meant to get hold of them, but you did try, and chased them a long way. If you succeeded in catching them it was fun, a real joke. I remember some disguised girls who tried to save themselves from being caught in a barge. The pursuers discovered the girls and pushed the barge out in the water. Then the girls were helpless because they didn’t have any oars or anything else to help themselves with. They had to stand there for several hours until someone rescued them. People thought they could treat those who were dressed up as they wished if they caught them.)

As can be seen here, those that threw *påskbrev* were often dressed up as witches to avoid being recognised. However, this was not a necessity. Like the custom of dressing up as *påskkäringar*, that of sending *påskbrev* has hardly been examined in any depth. Some scholars, however, claim that the tradition is probably a recent phenomenon which originated in the cities.¹¹ In an article concerning the celebration of Easter in Åmål, Dalsland, a depiction is given of a *påskbrev* which is said to be 150 years old. Since the article was printed in the 1930s, this would mean the aforementioned “Easter letter” must have been made in the latter part of the eighteenth century (Forsberg 1934: 78–85). Christian Aarsrud (1988: 40–44) has also discovered one Easter letter made before the middle of the nineteenth century. Through mapping older folklore records, Julius Ejdestam (1939; cf. Mattsson 1973: 13) has revealed that the tradition was widespread in the western parts of Sweden during the latter part of the nineteenth century. Throwing *påskbrev*, however, was not a necessary activity for the *påskkäringar*. According to earlier folklore records, it was almost as common for *påskkäringar* simply to walk around villages, trying to frighten people. Furthermore, it is often stated that these youths played all sorts of tricks on Easter Saturday. Katarina Nilsson, of Östra Emtervik in Värmland, says the following about the tradition as it was in her youth:

De unga brukade kläda ut sig på påskkvällen och spela spratt med varandra och i gårdarna. De klädde ut sig ”eländigt”. De voro ute för att rida till ”Blåkulla”. Och de

¹¹ Cf. Aarsrud 1988; von Sydow 1916: 60; and Svensson 1938: 70.

klädde ut sig till käringar och gubbar; flickorna till anskrämliga gubbar och pojkarna till käringar. Somliga hade fula ”skråbukansikte” på sig. [...] Nej, ungdomen hade sina upptåg. De jamade som kattor och ”vände bort rösten”. Ett omtyckt nöje var att repa efter väggarna med käppar och ställa till oljud på fönstren, ja t.o.m. att placera en sten genom skorstenen. Träffade de på en kärra eller vagn på gården kunde det falla dem in att stjälpå den. Alla sådana där upptåg hittade de på. Det var inte alla gårdar som voro trakterade av att få sådana påhälsningar, men det var ingenting att göra åt saken. Och blev man arg och lät veta detta, så kunde det bli ännu värre nästa års påskkväll (IFGH 2472: 42–44: Östra Emterik, Värmland).

(The young people used to dress up themselves on Easter Sunday and play tricks on each other and in the farmyards. They dressed up in “wretched” clothes. They were out riding to Blåkulla. And they dressed up as old women and men, the girls as hideous men and the boys as old women. Some of them wore ugly masks. [...] Yes, the youths had their tricks. They mewed like cats and “distorted” their voices. It was very popular to scratch along the walls with sticks and make noises at the windows. Yes, they might even put stones down the chimneys. If they came across a cart or a wagon, they could overturn it. They made up all sorts of tricks like that. Not every farmyard was pleased to get visited like that, but you couldn’t do anything about it. And if you were angry and let them know, it could be even worse the next Easter Saturday.)

As with other nineteenth-century mumming traditions in the western parts of Sweden, such as the *Knutgubbar* (*Knut* men) or *lussegubbar* (*Lusse* men),¹² it is said that the Easter mummers would sometimes simply visit houses instead of throwing *påskbrev*. The purpose then was to frighten the hosts and/ or obtain cookies, sweets or, perhaps more commonly, schnapps:

De skulle föreställa att de voro riktiga häxor. Pojkarna klädde sig i fruntimmerskläder och flickorna i karkläder, så gick de i gårdarna och förde skoj. De klädde på sig gamla trasor och sotade sig i ansiktet, så kunde de ha dragit en vänstersko på högra foten och tvärt om. Så gick de till grannarna undan för undan. De tog fatt i husfolket och dansade med dem. Så fick de fägnad. De förvrängde rösten, så att ingen skulle känna igen dem (IFGH 2655: 39: Nedre Ullerud, Värmland).

(They tried to imitate real witches. The boys dressed up in women’s clothes and the girls in men’s clothes. Then they visited houses and joked. They used old rags and painted their faces with soot. And they might put a right shoe on their left foot and vice versa. Then they walked to the neighbours one by one. The mummers grabbed hold of the hosts and danced with them. Then they received food and drink. They distorted their voices in order not to be recognised.)

Irrespective of whether the mummers threw *påskbrev* into houses or not, unmasking was an essential part of the tradition. As noted, the mummers were supposed to be anonymous. When they visited houses, they were silent or distorted their voices. Often it is said that the hosts would try to expose the mummers by asking questions. As one person commented: “Frågade man, var de var ifrån, så var de så långt bortifrån, från Grönland och Island” (If you asked them where they came from, it was always from a long way away, from Green-

¹² See further the Surveys of Masks and Mumming Traditions in Sweden, and Finland and Karelia elsewhere in this volume.

land or Iceland: IFGH 5890: 41).¹³ However, more often people say that the hosts would try to expose the mummers by force, while they defended themselves with the brooms or poles they had brought with them (cf. IFGH 1198: 25; and 2637: 34):

Somliga anställde jakt efter dem. Fick man tag i någon av de ”utklädda”, gav man sig inte med mindre än att man fick se vem det var. Värst voro om flickor blevo fångade, ty då fördes ett väldigt skämt med dem. Det var väl gott om de inte rev trasorna av dem. De blevo ”kringkända” och ”kringklämda” (IFGH 2583: 45: Södra Ny, Värmland).

(Some people started hunting them. If anyone caught one of the mummers, they wouldn't give in until they could see who it was. It was worst when girls were captured, because then they played around with them awfully. They were lucky if their rags weren't pulled off. They were “felt all over” and “squeezed all around”.¹⁴)

The Easter mumming tradition in Sweden should thus be considered as a form of interplay between the visitors and their hosts like many other mumming traditions.¹⁵ The custom can also be regarded as a more or less accepted revolt against the world of grown-ups and everyday hierarchies of power (cf. Klein 1995: 30–33; and af Klintberg 1999: 25). On Easter Saturday, young people were allowed to do things that would normally not be accepted, like, for example, messing windows with tar (VFF 651:12), or begging for money and schnapps, and not least walking around villages dressed up as witches and frightening older people.

Beliefs, Customs and Legends

As is evident from the examples given above, the *påskkäringar* with their clothes, coffee pots, brooms and horns, did their best to imitate “real” witches, like those described in the contemporary legends of the time. Over and above this, the mummers would also try to imitate the actions of the witches (cf. af Klintberg 1999; and Dégh and Vázsonyi 1983). As noted above, in the legends and seventeenth-century court records, one reads that witches were sometimes supposed to fly up through chimneys on their way to the meetings with the Devil in Blåkulla. Echoes of this are seen in certain folklore records which tell of *påskkäringar* sometimes climbing up onto roofs and pouring ash down chimneys (IFGH 2722: 54; cf. af Klintberg 1986: 227; and Skott 1999: 116).

¹³ For comparable traditions about mummers talking of coming from elsewhere, see also the articles by Hanne Pico Larsen and Vilborg Davíðsdóttir, as well as the Survey of Masks and Mumming Traditions in the North Atlantic (on Shetland and the Faroes) elsewhere in this book. See also Gunnell 2007a (forthcoming).

¹⁴ For further discussion of this sort of erotic play in mumming traditions, see the article by Annikki Kaivola-Bregenhøj elsewhere in this volume.

¹⁵ For further discussion of the element of interplay in mumming traditions, see the article by Hanne Pico Larsen elsewhere in this book.

One somewhat unclear record from Värmland says how the dressed-up *påskkäringar* went inside cowhouses and cut the cattle, something which was supposed to be common behaviour by those “real” witches described in legends (IFGH 706: 6; cf. Skott 1999: 117). Another record from Västergötland tells how the mummies went inside cowhouses with the intention of making owners believe that “real” witches had been there:

Om påsk klädde de ut sig till påskkäringar och tog hästarna och red på dem, så de blev svettiga, eller slog åtminstone vatten på dem, så de såg blöta ut, och sen trodde folket i gården att trolltyg ridit dem (IFGH 2867: 6: Marbäck, Västergötland).

(At Easter they disguised themselves as Easter witches. They took the horses and rode them until they perspired, or poured water over them so that they looked all wet. Then their owners believed that witches had ridden them.)

By acting the role of the witches known about in contemporary legends, the costumed *påskkäringar* of the nineteenth century were clearly trying to frighten the inhabitants of the houses they visited. Indeed, many narratives from earlier Swedish folklore records give evidence of the fact that they actually succeeded in this aim, frightening both children and older people, as the following two accounts demonstrate:

På påskkvällen klädde flickor och pojkar ut sig å gick påskkäring och påskgubbe. De hade sopkvast med sig som de repade på fönster och dörrar med, så att de höll på att skrämja livet ur barnen. Å enfaldiga äldre blev också förskrämda (IFGH 2988: 35: Åmål, Dalsland).

(On Easter Saturday the boys and girls would dress themselves up and walk around as Easter witches and Easter trolls. They brought brooms that they utilised to scratch windows and doors. They almost frightened the children to death. And the simple-minded old people were also scared.)

Påskkäringar och påskgubbar. Det var ungdomar i 20–25-års åldern, som klädde ut sig. Flickorna hade långa kjolar och dukar över håret. De målade sig på pannan, kinden och hakan och hade kaffekittel och sop. Pojkarna tog på sig gammalt och målade sig de med. Ofta for de till Skee med någon som de fick åka med och gick hem och skrämde folk. En gång hade de skrämt prästen i Skee så han gick hem och gjorde en predikan om trollkäringar (IFGH 5766: 20–21: Strömstad, Bohuslän).

(Easter witches and Easter trolls. These were disguised youths about 20 to 25 years old. The girls used long skirts and headcloths. They painted themselves on their foreheads, cheeks and chins and had a coffee pot and a broom. The boys wore something old and they too painted themselves. Often they went to Skee parish with someone, visited houses and frightened people. Once they scared the priest in Skee so much that he went home and wrote a sermon about witches.)

As pointed out earlier, several trials involving accusations of journeys to Blåkulla, superstition and black magic still took place in Sweden in the middle of the nineteenth century. Such trials, however, were uncommon and should be considered as isolated cases. Furthermore, none of those accused in these trials were ever convicted of witchcraft. In spite of the fact that many records exist from even the beginning of the twentieth century showing that older people

still believed in witches and Blåkulla, one cannot really claim that the belief in “real” witches was still common or widespread during the late nineteenth century. The main reason for why many scholars have classified the *påskkäring* tradition as being a recent phenomenon in Sweden was because they suppose a condition for its origin must have been that the belief in “real” witches and witchcraft was no longer common or widespread.¹⁶ That the custom of people dressing up or disguising themselves as witches is not a recent phenomenon is obvious from the above, but the origin of the tradition is still unknown. Could the custom of people disguising themselves as witches have originated in times when the belief in witches was still more or less widespread?

It is difficult to try to settle the origin of traditions (and in Sweden, such approaches tend to be regarded as old-fashioned). Very often, such attempts are quite impossible considering the paucity of the extant source material. This is especially applicable in the case of the *påskkäringar*. Nonetheless, it seems very likely that the tradition was already widespread in the western parts of Sweden at the beginning of the nineteenth century, and possibly even earlier. Nils-Petrus Ödman, for instance, claims in his description of the mummers in Karlstad and Åmål in the late nineteenth century that the tradition “lär ha mycket gamla anor” (is said to have a long history: Ödman 1887: 63–64). The folklore records also provide many indications that the custom existed in a number of western Swedish provinces at the beginning of the nineteenth century. For example, one informant born in 1872 says that the tradition had existed “länge, hela min tid och på mina föräldrars tid med” (for a long time, all my life, and in my parents’ times as well: IFGH 5766: 20–21). A large number of informants born between the 1840s and the 1870s from Bohuslän, Dalsland and Värmland also draw attention to the fact that the tradition existed before their time. Of course, drawing conclusions about the age of the tradition from folklore records of this kind is untrustworthy. However, as noted above, one can at least assume that the tradition was widespread in the western parts of Sweden at the beginning of the nineteenth century. The informants probably would have known if the tradition had originated in their youth and also if their parents and maybe also their grandparents had disguised themselves when they were young. Further indications of the tradition’s existence at the beginning of the nineteenth century can be found in court records from that time. For instance, it was argued in certain parish meetings in northern Halland in the 1820s that fines should be imposed on those that went around as *stjärngossar* (Star Boys) during Christmas or “vid Påsktider bruka upptåg med utklädning” (dressed up themselves at Easter: SLHD: Copy of the minutes of public parish meetings, Tölö Assembly, December 19, 1828).¹⁷

¹⁶ See Aarsrud 1988: 12; Bringéus 1973: 134, and 1999:50; and Eskeröd 1953.

¹⁷ See SLHD (*Svensk lokalhistorisk databas*: <http://www.lokalhistoria.nu/> [last visited March 1, 2007]). Worth noting in this connection is that in northern parts of Halland, other mumming traditions used to exist at Easter during the nineteenth century. It is uncertain if these court records deal with *påskkäringar* or something else.

In spite of the present lack of evidence, it must thus be regarded as highly probable that the custom of people dressing up or disguising themselves as witches in Sweden originated in the eighteenth or very early nineteenth century, at a time when the belief in witches and witchcraft was probably still common among a large part of the population. However, the belief in witches is not necessarily contradictory to the idea of people disguising themselves as witches. Indeed, many mumming traditions in Sweden as well as elsewhere are distinguished by the connections they show between beliefs in supernatural beings, narratives about them, and the customs involving disguises associated with such beings. One can mention, for example, the festival of *Samhain* (Hallowe'en) in Scotland and Ireland, a time when the barriers between this world and the next came down, when the dead walked abroad, and when encounters between mortals and otherworld beings took place. At the same time, people disguised as ghosts and hobgoblins walked around in the villages.¹⁸ A Swedish example of the same kind is that of *Lucia* night (December 12), which was also thought to be a period when evil spirits were particularly active. On the same night, masked youths in the western parts of the country tried to imitate the supernatural beings that occurred in legends. They walked around in the villages masked and dressed in rags, frightening people and demanding gifts or "offerings".¹⁹ Further examples can be seen in the Norwegian *julebukk*, the Faroese *grýlur*, and the Shetland *grøliks* and *skeklers*.²⁰ As Lily Weiser-Aall, Christine Eike and Terry Gunnell have noted,²¹ all of these figures could take the form of masked figures, but it was also believed that they were living supernatural beings.

Unpublished Manuscripts and Local Archive Sources

In addition to the works contained in the *General Bibliography*, material from the following sources are referred to in this survey:

DAG (*Institutet för språk och folkminnen: Dialekt-, ortnamns- och folkminnesarkivet i Göteborg*):

Records: DAGF, IFGH, and VFF

LUF (*Folkliksarkivet, Lund*):

Records: LUF

SOFI, FA (*Institutet för språk och folkminnen: Folkminnesavdelningen, Uppsala*):

Records: ULMA

Nm (*Nordiska museet*):

Records: EU

ULA (*Landsarkivet i Uppsala*):

Court records

¹⁸ See Lysaght 2001: 199; af Klintberg 1999: 24; and Lilja 1998 and 2001.

¹⁹ See af Klintberg 1999: 24; Bergstrand 1935; and Strömberg 1996.

²⁰ See further the Surveys of Masks and Mumming Traditions in Norway and the North Atlantic elsewhere in this volume.

²¹ See Weiser-Aall 1954: 48; Eike 1980; and Gunnell 2007a (forthcoming).