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Everyday nationalism in Swedish preschools: something old, something new and something borrowed

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores everyday nationalism in relation to work with traditions in Swedish preschools, as well as how preschool teachers reflect on these practices. One of the tasks of the Swedish preschools is to transmit and develop a cultural heritage. In Sweden, 95% of children aged 3–5 attend preschool. Approximately one fourth have a foreign background. Moreover, preschool children encounter very different cultural realities depending on where their preschool is located. Sweden is a secular as well as multi-religious country. This makes the cultural heritage that the preschools are supposed to transmit ambiguous and complex. Based on a survey where preschool practitioners answered questions about what traditions they pay attention to and what content they fill these traditions with, the article maps which traditions preschool practitioners actualize in their preschool practices. The data is analyzed and discussed in relation to everyday nationalism and the pedagogy of nation. The results show that the everyday nationalism of Swedish preschools both consolidates and challenges the traditions generally considered as being rooted in Swedish history. At the same time, many preschools integrate new traditions into their repertoire that represent societal changes, both in terms of cultural globalization and in terms of the traditions of religious minorities gaining greater visibility.

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Introduction

In Sweden, preschool is the first and one of the most influential arenas for socialization and enculturation (Alvestad and Pramling Samuelsson 1999). Over 80% of all children aged 1–5 are enrolled in preschool education. From age 3–5, the rate is 95% (Skolverket 2022). Between 2010 and 2020, the proportion of children with a foreign background in Swedish educational institutions grew from 20 to 29% (SCB 2020; Skolverket 2021). Consequently, preschools are settings where children with various backgrounds, experiences, and beliefs meet and share similar experiences of what it means to be a child in Sweden. The Swedish preschool curriculum explicitly states that '[t]he preschool's task includes transferring and developing a cultural heritage ... from one generation to the next' (Skolverket 2019, 9). This statement suggests that preschools are supposed to help to create a common national sense of belonging for the children. In addition, the preschool should ensure that each child has an opportunity to develop 'their cultural identity and knowledge of and interest in different cultures, and an understanding of the value of living in a society characterized by diversity as

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well as an interest in local culture' (Skolverket 2019, 15). Here, the shared culture is described as diverse and tolerant (cf. Kuusisto, Poulter, and Harju-Luukkainen 2021). This article contributes to ongoing discussions about banal or everyday nation(hood)(alism) (Åkerblom and Harju 2021; Antonsich 2020; Billig 1995; Knott 2015; Millei and Imre 2021; Skey 2009; Zembylas 2021) by exploring the religious and secular traditions that preschools use as tools to transmit and construct cultural heritage and cultural identity. In this way, we elucidate the role of religion in the problematic boundary work of enactment and transmission of a cultural heritage.

Although Sweden, like all the Nordic countries, is ideologically secular, Lutheran Protestantism is integrated into social practices and everyday life (Pettersson 2011). This has resulted in a situation permeated with 'cultural Protestantism' (Buchardt 2015). The concept refers to how Protestantism is represented as a central component of the nation's culture and values. This is confirmed by a study of religion education in Swedish schools which concludes that although the educational aims are considered neutral, in practice, education is marinated in Lutheran Christianity, not least regarding how holidays are celebrated in educational institutions (Berglund 2013). This is a problem not only in relation to freedom of religion but also regarding how it might marginalize students with divergent religious and cultural backgrounds. In Swedish preschools, there is no explicit religion education, only the task of transmitting a cultural heritage. Furthermore, learning is predominantly seen as an outcome of practices and experiences, not of instruction. Consequently, it is through participation in what are perceived as traditional practices that preschool children are enculturated into a common cultural heritage. So far, there is little knowledge about holidays, traditions, and other practices that are salient parts of the Swedish preschool curriculum. Consequently, the objective of this article is to present and discuss how traditions that preschools engage in are constitutive elements in the construction of cultural heritage as enactments of everyday nationalism.

Traditions, religion, cultural heritage, and everyday nationalism

Key concepts in this paper are traditions, religion, cultural heritage, and everyday nationalism. The first three concepts are used both in the way that they are commonly understood by social actors in everyday contexts and as theoretical, analytical concepts to elucidate relations and connections we would otherwise be blind to. The fourth concept – everyday nationalism – is a theoretical concept that we use as a lens for the analysis of how preschools actively construct and naturalize differing conceptions about what living in Sweden entails.

As an analytical concept, we define tradition as a set of practices governed by unspoken rules and rituals, which consolidate specific norms and values by anchoring them in ideas of a common past (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983). While most traditions derive their power from the idea that 'we do this because we have always done so', traditions are shaped and given meaning in relation to the places where they are performed. Consequently, traditions can arise both by reinterpreting old cultural practices and furnishing them with new meanings, and by establishing or inventing new traditions to create or strengthen a national identity (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983). Swedishness, like other national identities, as a foundation for a common cultural heritage, is constructed in different arenas with the help of narratives and experiences (Ehn, Frykman, and Löfgren 1993). The concept of tradition denotes holidays, everyday norms, and old customs that are repeated either in a more closed community, such as the family and preschool, or in large national collectives (or images thereof). Traditions are not stable. When a tradition, or a part of a tradition, is no longer justified by its social context, it may weaken, change, or fade away (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983). For example, in the past century, in Western Europe as well as in Northern America, Christmas has changed from a primarily religious holiday to 'a ritual of gift-giving and feasting' (Klassen and Scheer 2019, 3).

In this article, we understand religion as a social phenomenon consisting of collections of practices, stories, and ideas that are given meaning by, or originate from, religious institutions

(Andersson and Sander 2015). Even though religions gain power from conceptions about their essentialism and stable nature, as social phenomena they are constructed institutions that change in relation to different spatial and temporal contexts. In Sweden, despite increasing secularization, religious beliefs and practices are intertwined with what is understood as the national cultural heritage, which among other elements encompasses church buildings, religious services at nationally significant events, and national religious holidays (Arthur 2013; Skogar 2011). The dominant conception of the nature and significance of religion in Sweden is what has been described as 'Swedish secularism' (Reimers 2019). As a concept and a condition, secularism is deeply entangled with the nation. Secularism is present when nation states are dominated by conceptions about religion as a private matter, and where institutionalized religion has not only lost power over society but been replaced by a suspicion of everything religious (Brown 2013). Swedish secularism simultaneously takes for granted several practices and notions from the Lutheran Church and marginalizes religious institutions and convictions as obsolete.

The cultural heritage that Swedish preschools are expected to transmit is a mix of images of the nation, of geographical borders, history, community, values, traditions, and religion (cf. Millei 2019). Together, this makes certain cultural practices appear as normal or given, while others appear as deviant. In this way, the concept of cultural heritage is closely related to the more analytical concept of everyday nationalism (Millei 2021; Skey 2011; Skey and Antonsich 2017), which builds on Billig's seminal work on the concept of banal nationalism (Billig 1995). The two concepts are closely related, but not mutually exclusive. Banal nationalism emphasizes the nation as a social condition whereas everyday nationalism emphasizes the role of human subjects (Billig 1995; Millei and Imre 2021; Skey 2009). In using everyday nationalism rather than banal nationalism, we stress the importance of empirical studies of how the nation is expressed through the taken-for-granted symbolic systems of everyday life (Skey 2011). The argument is that feelings of national identity emerge from social practices and performances in everyday life that are entangled with material and immaterial elements (Merriman and Jones 2017). Based on the recent emergence of nationalist movements, or so-called 'hot nationalism' in different parts of the world, Antonsich (2020) suggests using the term 'everyday nation', instead of everyday nationalism. For this article, we have not made such a distinction, in order to avoid downplaying the border work of traditions and cultural heritage. In its different enactments, the nation is simultaneously repeated and changed.

National holidays are celebrated both in the preschool and in the surrounding community. Preschools thereby integrate children into a national-cultural community (Lappalainen 2009; Puskás and Andersson 2017). In research on younger children, Barrett describes this inclusion process as 'national enculturation' (Barrett 2007), while Millei uses the term 'pedagogy of nation', or 'learning nation' to emphasize the same or similar practices (Millei 2019). Drawing on this, we argue that preschool practices explained in terms of paying attention to cultural traditions and the celebration of national holidays and festivals contribute to pedagogies of nation. These practices are activities where preschool personnel and children make use of different resources that represent and/or create a common cultural sense of belonging.

Enculturation and religion in Nordic preschools

Not only do the Nordic countries: Sweden, Norway, Finland, and Denmark, share a common situation as secular states with a history of national Lutheran churches, but there are also strong similarities about the organization and pedagogy of preschools. The OECD quality assessment document *Starting Strong II* (OECD 2006, 141) differentiates between Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) based on the one hand on 'readiness for school' and on the other hand on 'the Nordic tradition'. Significant common traits of the latter are the child is seen as a subject with rights; child-centeredness; preschools are socio-educational services serving both community and family interests; policies are broad and encompass both developmental and educational goals; a strong emphasis on outdoor activities; and no requirements for formal assessment (OECD 2006, 141).

Previous studies of the role of traditions and religion in the Nordic preschool model demonstrate both common and differing strategies and policies. A salient commonality is that preschool teachers' accounts of what they find difficult in their work often mix conceptions about ethnicity and religion. Practitioners in ethnically diverse preschools in Norway, Denmark, Finland, and Sweden state that children's religious background constitutes a sensitive issue (Stier and Sandström 2018). While previous studies on Swedish early childhood education have shown that the preschool is a context where children are socialized into Swedish cultural traditions (Ehn 1986; Ronström, Runfors, and Wahlström 1995), there are few studies about how preschools enact and transfer a cultural heritage. A study conducted in Swedish preschools shows that preschool teachers often describe cultural modes of expression linked to ethnic minorities in religious terms (Lunneblad 2009). At the same time, the descriptions of the ethnic majority groups' cultural expressions of religion and nationality tend to flow together so that elements from the former state church are seen as a non-religious constitutive part of the national cultural heritage. One example is that while Easter is considered a Swedish national holiday, Ramadan is described as a Muslim religious holiday (Puskás and Andersson 2019; Reimers 2019). The traditions that are practiced in Swedish preschools are not necessarily free from religious considerations (Puskás and Andersson 2019; Reimers 2019), as the Lutheran Christian elements are integrated into the national culture. Similar conclusions are reached in studies on the relationship between traditions and religion in Finnish preschools (Lappalainen 2006, 2009). Lappalainen's studies show that traditions with Christian roots, such as Christmas, the Feast of the Annunciation to the Virgin Mary (Waffle Day) and Easter are described as old Finnish traditions without reference to religion, despite policy demanding an intercultural, worldview-sensitive pedagogical approach to religion in preschools (Kuusisto and Lamminmäki-Vartia 2012; Kuusisto, Poulter, and Harju-Luukkainen 2021; Poulter, Riitaoja, and Kuusisto 2016; Riitaoja, Poulter, and Kuusisto 2010). In preschools where children have differing cultural backgrounds, it is recommended that preschool practitioners work inclusively with both religious and non-religious worldviews. At the same time, neither the Finnish guidelines nor the Swedish and Danish curricula, state that the Christian heritage is an integral part of the national cultural heritage (Vallberg Roth 2014).

Unlike the Swedish curriculum, which does not mention religion as a dimension of the cultural heritage to be transferred from one generation to another, the Norwegian curriculum for early childhood education is explicit about the idea that children should learn about different religions and religious festivals (Kunskapsdepartementet 2011, 47). However, research shows that religion as such generates uneasiness among the teachers. When it comes to traditions with Christian roots, these tend to be seen as traditions with no religious content, while traditions based in other religions, for example Islam, are ignored (Krogstad 2017). The tendency in Denmark is very much the same. Although religion is completely absent from the preschool curriculum (Ministry for Families 2007), Christian traditions are represented not as religious but as components of the Danish cultural heritage (Boelskov and Tveiterås 2012).

Although preschool curricula in the Nordic countries deal with religion, cultural heritage, and diversity in preschool differently, in practice the Nordic preschools pay attention to religion in similar ways (Kuusisto, Poulter, and Harju-Luukkainen 2021). Religiously motivated traditions are represented as national rather than religious holidays (Krogstad and Walmann Hidle 2015; Lappalainen 2006, 2009). Studies of tradition and religion in Swedish preschools demonstrate that the traditions that are practiced in connection to the public holidays represent both continuity and change (Puskás and Andersson 2019; Reimers 2019). Observations of everyday preschool practice (Puskás and Andersson 2021, 2022; Reimers 2019) and interviews with preschool practitioners (Puskás 2022; Reimers 2019) show that the preschools observe traditions with Lutheran Christian roots (Christmas, Easter) or connotations (Lucia), even if the content of the celebrations is changing. In addition, new traditions are inserted into the repertoire of culturally significant practices.

There is considerable policy research about how nationalism and national identity are constructed and enforced in ECEC curricula. However, manifestations of everyday nationalism in preschool practices are explored to a lesser extent (Zembylas 2021, 515). Furthermore, most studies of

everyday nationalism focus on how nationalism is built around norms and conceptions about race and/or ethnicity, while there are few studies of religion as an aspect of everyday nationalism (Zembylas 2021).

The aim of this article is to explore how everyday nationalism is enacted in Swedish preschools through traditions that preschool staff consider part of a cultural heritage to be transmitted to the children. The research questions are.

- What traditions and holidays do Swedish preschools pay attention to?
- How do preschools pay attention to different traditions?
- How can the practices associated with traditions be understood in relation to everyday nationalism?

Methodological considerations

The data for this article is a survey on the practice of traditions in Swedish preschools. It was produced at the outset of an ethnographic study where we followed two preschools over one year by observing and filming activities that were defined by the preschools themselves as part of their mission to transmit a cultural heritage. The video data was edited into a film which we used as an introduction for focus-group interviews with staff from 16 different preschools (see Puskás and Andersson 2017, 2019, 2021, 2022; Reimers 2019). The main objective of the introductory survey was to gain knowledge about the prevalence of different traditions and how preschool teachers more generally perceived the task of transmitting a cultural heritage. In this way, the survey, besides providing hitherto unknown knowledge about one aspect of Swedish preschools, contributes to the validity of the ethnographic parts of the project.

A questionnaire was sent to preschools in 23 municipalities in different parts of Sweden. The survey consisted of 29 questions divided into two areas. The first area of interest solicited information about the respondents' professional backgrounds and about the preschools they worked in. The second section started with a question about which traditions were celebrated in the preschools the practitioners worked in. To make sure that the questionnaire included all relevant traditions, we conducted a pilot study with a small set of preschool teachers in our area. The participants in the pilot study were asked to give and gave us advice on what to include and on how to formulate the questions. The final questionnaire listed 34 traditions, including 'other'. We then asked how they practiced individual traditions, whether they ate food corresponding to the cultural traditions celebrated, and which items they decorated the preschool with. All questions were multiple choice, with space provided for additional comments.

The questionnaire was answered by preschool staff in rural and urban areas, as well as in different socio-economic areas. We received 1167 individual answers and answers from 465 different preschools. Of the respondents, 60% work as preschool teachers, 32% as childminders, and 2% as preschool principals. Initially, we sent the questionnaire to a selected variety of municipalities asking them to distribute the survey to their preschools or to give us lists so we could distribute them. This did not result in a sufficient number of responses. After that, we asked personnel whom we met when lecturing at in-service training for preschool teachers. This resulted in additional replies. Lastly, we turned to preschools where we knew people. Together, this resulted in over 1000 answers from a wide spectrum of preschools with a variety in regions, social contexts, and profiles. The answers were anonymous. In some preschools, several members of the staff answered and in others only one. Even though the survey is not statistically representative, we argue that its breadth and scope provide a fair representation of which traditions Swedish preschools pay attention to, how this is done, and the role of religion in these practices.

The analysis was done in two steps. The first step was a quantitative analysis answering the question of which traditions were most celebrated in Swedish preschools. The questionnaire was not

designed for calculating statistical associations. Our aim with the quantitative data was to map which traditions preschools work with and what explanations are given for these practices. To gain some insight into the respondents' views on traditions, we included comment sections. These sections have been used by the respondents to add additional information on their way of dealing with individual traditions as cultural heritage, particularly with the current demand for non-confessionalism. In the second step of the analysis, we conducted a qualitative content analysis of the comments. The analysis of these open-ended comments adds a level of complexity and depth that would not have been available by quantitative analysis alone. Through content analysis, we have obtained a more in-depth understanding of what challenges preschool staff identify in relation to the curricular task of transmitting traditions, some of which are associated with Lutheran Christianity, while keeping education non-confessional. In the findings, we discuss the results of the content analysis in relation to the analytical concepts of tradition, religion, cultural heritage, and everyday nationalism to elucidate (a) how Swedish preschools transmit a cultural heritage, (b) the role of religion in this work, and (c) significant traits in the everyday nationalism thus produced.

Quantifying the answers about which traditions the preschools paid attention to, we found that the preschool year is characterized by recurring holidays, celebrations, and traditions, reaching a peak during the month of December, which is devoted to Advent and the approach of Christmas. As expected, the holidays that get the most attention in Swedish preschools are the national holidays, which correspond to the most widely celebrated holidays in Swedish society: Christmas, Easter, and Midsummer. More than 90% of the respondents pay attention to these three holidays by means of different activities. Among the other festivals and holidays widely practiced in Swedish preschools are children's birthdays (80%), National Preschool Day (80%), summer festival (62%), Halloween (53%), and Valentine's Day (66%). Here, we have chosen to focus on traditions that are collective (i.e. not including birthdays) or manifested by actors outside the preschools (i.e. not including Preschool Day and summer festival). Furthermore, there is a considerable difference in how much time the preschools invest in the activities related to the holidays. While the preparations for Midsummer – practicing songs and dances, picking flowers, and constructing a maypole – last for a day or two, the activities related to Christmas and Easter extend over several days (Easter) or weeks (Christmas) (see below).

When it comes to content, the survey shows that most celebrations combine activities such as baking and eating specific food, learning and singing songs and rhymes, dancing, and making decorations and costumes. It is unusual for the staff to explain the motives for the celebrations. Of the respondents, 30% answer that they tell the children why Christmas is celebrated and 20% why Midsummer and Easter are celebrated. This indicates that preschool staff often practice traditions with the children but rarely explain why a holiday is celebrated (cf. Puskás and Andersson 2017), why they decorate the preschool and do special craft activities, eat different kinds of food, and sing different songs in connection with the differing traditions.

The survey shows that the cultural heritage that preschools transmit is comprised of traditions with different roots. There are old religious or folkloristic traditions, there are non-religious traditions with roots in other countries, and there are new traditions. In the following, we discuss in more detail what activities the preschools engage in. We present this discussion under three headings: culturalization of old holidays, borrowed traditions: Halloween and Valentine's Day, and new traditions in the name of diversity.

Culturalization of old holidays

The survey included two statements on what kind of traditions the preschools paid attention to. According to one statement, the preschool practices Swedish holidays and traditions, while according to another statement the preschool celebrates religious holidays and traditions. While 94% of the respondents agreed with the former, 55% agreed with the latter. The difference between the two figures deserves attention. The survey shows that Santa Lucia (97%), Christmas (93%), and

Easter (92%) score highest in terms of which traditions are celebrated in most preschools. All these traditions have a religious core, but as only 55% of the respondents agree with the statement that they pay attention to religious holidays, we may assume that the rest of the respondents make no apparent distinction between Swedish holidays and religious holidays. In other words, while most preschools celebrate old traditions that can be seen both as Swedish and religious, there is a difference in interpretations as far as the religious and cultural content is concerned. The religious component seems to cause trouble in many preschools.

Several respondents' reflections about which traditions they paid attention to were based on the cultural and religious composition of the children in the preschool in question. These reflections went in different directions. Some justified observing Swedish national Christian traditions with statements like 'we only have Swedish children', 'yes but without the religious part because we have several religions represented in the group'. The comments indicate an everyday nationalism where some children are perceived as more Swedish than others, and that their 'Swedishness' makes it unproblematic to celebrate religious (Lutheran Christian) holidays. The second comment refers to the religious composition of the children and not to nationality, by arguing that children from non-Christian families should not have to be subjected to anything religious in the preschool.

Responses to the statement on observing religious traditions led to specifications about which holidays were regarded as religious. These were 'Christmas and Easter', 'Lucia, Christmas, Easter, and Midsummer'. This induced reflections about the problematic aspects of holidays with religious roots. One respondent wrote: 'Christmas and Easter can still be associated with religion. But in our preschool, we omit the religious aspects of them'. Thus, the respondents define the Christian holidays that are most celebrated or recognized in Swedish preschools as national rather than religious holidays. This secularization, or culturalization, can be understood as a result of and an example of Swedish secularism, where Christian holidays are defined as national, and thus as without religious content or connotations. In the next section, we elaborate on the workings of secularism and culturalization using concrete examples.

Advent and Santa Lucia

The tendency to secularize and culturalize Christmas is apparent in the data. In most participating preschools, December is characterized by the approach of Christmas. Preparations begin four weeks before Christmas with lighting the first Advent candle (in 69% of the preschools) during circle time, and in most preschools (66%), children open the first flap of the Advent calendar. Thus, the anticipation of the Christmas holiday is conspicuously present in most preschools throughout December. At the same time, only one third of the respondents tell the children about the religious connection between Advent and Christmas, and just under nine percent visit a church during Advent. This absence of overt religion is somewhat paradoxical. By lighting Advent candles, preschools allude to the anticipation of a holiday that celebrates the birth of Christ, which gets closer with every new candle that is lit. At the same time, they avoid talking about the original meaning of these practices. How the wait for Christmas is staged can vary slightly, but almost every preschool performs some sort of activity.

Close to all preschools celebrate Santa Lucia (97%). The Lucia tradition in Swedish preschools is characterized by parents, children, and preschool staff celebrating together on the morning of December 13th. The children are traditionally dressed up as Lucia in white gowns and with a crown of (electric) candles or with candles in their hands, or as 'tomtar' [elves] and gingerbread people, but may also dress as spiderman or something else they prefer. They perform a Lucia parade for their families, singing songs and/or reciting rhymes. The parade is followed by 'fika' of coffee, fruit drink, Lucia buns, and gingerbread cookies (80%). The Lucia parade demands long and repeated preparations and rehearsals. The Lucia celebration is therefore an occasion where the preschool transmits traditional songs and demonstrates the preschool's activities for the parents (Puskás and Andersson 2017). At the same time, respondents state that both children and staff can experience these performances as being stressful. Even though one comment states that the staff

discuss whether they need to rearrange the Lucia celebration by replacing the performance for the parents with a singing session with staff, children, and parents, there is no indication in the survey that the interest in the Lucia celebration is decreasing. It seems rather that although some preschool staff try to change some elements of the celebration, they do not question the position as a significant event in the preschool year. Like Advent, few preschools (15%) state that they tell children why Lucia is celebrated. However, in relation to religion, there is a big difference between Advent and Lucia. Advent is part of the church year and thus has a given Christian meaning. The connection of the Lucia celebration to Christmas and the Christian faith is weak (Kättström Höök 2016). Despite being named after a Catholic saint, the Lucia celebration has emerged as a specific Swedish tradition (which later spread to Finland and Norway) that during large parts of the twentieth century was seen as a symbol of Swedish culture (Strömberg 2017). Based on this history of the Lucia celebration, it can be argued that it is a non-religious national tradition. Some respondents state that they do not stage a traditional Lucia celebration, but instead they hold a ‘candle party’ on Lucia Day. According to the comments, these candle parties contain the same elements as the Lucia celebration but calling it a candle party makes it more inclusive. This can be seen as a pseudo-secularization of a potentially offensive religious practice (cf. Niemi 2019). One respondent wrote: ‘We call it a candle party instead of a Lucia celebration to include all religions and to offer an opportunity where all parents are welcome with their backgrounds. We have Lucia parades and a potluck’. This indicates that renaming the celebration is a way to eliminate its possible religious connotations and dampen the anxiety of making mistakes. Although Lucia in Sweden has long been perceived as a national tradition, in some preschools there is a notion that parents with a different background than Swedish perceive Lucia as a religious holiday. The fact that some preschools in recent years have chosen to celebrate a candle party instead of Lucia is a way to avoid the Lucia celebration’s imagined Christian symbolism, while allowing it to retain its position as a significant national tradition.

Celebrating spring at Easter

The survey question about how preschools pay attention to religious holidays is expanded by several respondents with information such as ‘Christmas and Easter’ and ‘the Swedish ones’, ‘the Swedish traditions’, ‘Christmas and Easter but more as a cultural phenomenon’. Comments like these indicate that Christmas and Easter are mainly regarded as national, Swedish traditions, not as religious ones. Like Christmas, Easter gets considerable attention, where 91.5% affirm that they in some way or another arrange Easter activities. This means that almost all preschool children are made aware that it is Easter time, and that this is relevant to them. The most common activities are dressing up as Easter witches (73.5%), eating Easter food (85.2%), and crafts (85.7%). According to the survey, the Easter craft activities involve egg painting and making Easter chicks from scrap fabric or paper. Some respondents specify Easter activities such as an ‘egg-race’ or ‘egg-hunt’ together with other preschools.

Dressing up as Easter witches is common (70%). The outfit consists of discarded clothes, colored headscarves or hats, and red-painted cheeks. This activity downplays the Christian framing of Easter in favor of the national and folkloristic character of the holiday. The tradition of Easter witches originates from nineteenth century western Sweden and spread to the rest of the country during the twentieth century (Skott 2013). Apart from Sweden, the tradition only occurs in Finland. In the preschool version of the tradition, Easter witches are in competition with other figures associated with Easter, such as bunnies and chickens, but also with figures with no apparent connection to Easter such as Spiderman and vampires. The comments in the survey reveal that all these figures (witches, chicken, bunnies, vampires, and Spidermen, just to name the most frequent ones) appear side by side in the celebrations. One respondent writes: ‘We take the brooms to Blåkulla where we meet Drak-Ulla [Dracula] who offers witch soup’. This refers to a Swedish folk tale about witches who travel on brooms at Easter to the mountain Blåkulla/Blockula in order to party with Satan, although the staff don’t tell this version to the children. Other descriptive comments were: ‘We are visited by an Easter witch who brings presents to the children’, and ‘The Easter bunny visits

us with Easter eggs and soap bubbles'. Few respondents state that they talk to the children about why Easter is celebrated (20%). When this does happen, the answers indicate that the conversations center on celebrating Easter as a sign of the arrival of spring and not as a Christian holiday. This is not unambiguous: two percent of the respondents state that they visit a church in connection with Easter.

The survey thus indicates that Easter is a central element in how Swedish preschools construct a cultural heritage. It demonstrates that as a preschool tradition, Easter is manifested in activities, symbols (eggs, chickens, Easter twigs), and shared experiences. There seems to be an ambiguity between a secular and a religious explanation for the Easter celebrations. As a secular holiday, it is a celebration and manifestation of the end of winter and the coming of spring. As a religious holiday, it is a celebration of the resurrection of Christ. These two motives are not necessarily in opposition. In both cases, Easter is a celebration of the strength of life, which can then be seen as central in its incorporation into the cultural heritage.

Midsummer in preschools

At Midsummer, staff and children, and in some cases parents and siblings, dance around a maypole decorated with greenery and flowers. Most respondents answer that they and the children pick flowers and make wreaths for a maypole raised in the preschool playground (94%). The dance around the maypole is not complete without 'Små grodorna' [Little frogs], a dance where children and adults hop around the pole singing about and imitating frogs. This activity is preceded by a couple of days of practice where the children learn the song and dance traditions connected to Midsummer.

Midsummer does not seem to cause dilemmas for the preschool practitioners as far as its symbolic content is concerned, probably because its symbolism is not associated with religion. Midsummer in Swedish preschools is staged as a holiday that is associated not only with dancing around the pole but also with eating ice cream with strawberries. At the same time, the fact that over 90% of the preschools that participated in the survey celebrate Midsummer indicates that Swedish preschoolers are socialized into 'the patterns of national sharing' (Lövgren 1989, 42). Thus, through celebrating some of the traditions associated with Midsummer, preschool children become participants in the cultural heritage as it is initially constructed for them (by the practitioners) and eventually by the children themselves as they get more and more familiar with the rituals connected to the holiday.

Borrowed traditions: halloween and valentine's day

The survey evinces that in addition to the traditions that are seen as old and Swedish, for many, the Swedish preschool year encompasses more recently imported traditions. In Sweden, Halloween and Valentine's Day have been celebrated only for a few decades (Lilja 1998). Valentine's Day is celebrated by 66% of the respondents and 54% state that they celebrate Halloween. Thus, even if these holidays cannot compete with the Big Three – Christmas, Easter, and Midsummer – their position as holidays in Sweden has become stable since their introduction in the 1980s (Valentine's Day) and the 1990s (Halloween).

Halloween is celebrated on the weekend before All Saints' Day. In Sweden, the latter is a public holiday on the first Saturday in November. It is a day to remember and show respect to those who have passed away. According to the Church of Sweden's estimates (Svenska kyrkan 2016), around half of the population follows the tradition of lighting candles on the graves of relatives. Our survey shows that preschools pay limited attention to All Saints' Day (20%) either by lighting candles and talking about why people light candles at cemeteries. Comments from the respondents indicate that content related to All Saints' Day – cemeteries and death – is addressed only in response to direct questions from the children. The same comments reveal that the content related to this holiday is perceived as difficult.

This poses a stark contrast to how some preschools celebrate Halloween, by dressing up as ghosts, vampires, and skeletons. More than half of the respondents state that they celebrate Halloween. This shows that a new Anglo-Saxon tradition is given more space in Swedish preschools than the corresponding public holiday with religious roots. In the comments, some state that Halloween is the most popular holiday among the children because they appreciate the scariness of the costumes. Comments in the questionnaire indicate that the characters that are associated with Halloween have been adapted to the preschool context. Many respondents point out that children are welcome to dress in costumes other than the traditional Halloween ones (ghost, skeleton, and vampire) to make the holiday more child friendly. Others distance themselves by stating that they have celebrated Halloween, but that they have now stopped doing so because some children were scared. Others say that they have a Halloween party and dress in costumes, but without the horror theme. Dressing up for Halloween is, together with traditions of Easter witches and Lucia parades, an example of costume traditions (Skott 2013). By dressing as different characters, children and staff bring life to a contemporary cultural heritage.

According to the survey, it is more common for preschools to observe Valentine's Day (66%) than Halloween (54%). In Sweden, Valentine's Day is called 'Alla Hjärtans Dag' [All Hearts' Day]. The introduction of Valentine's Day was a commercial venture from the flower trade in the 1960s (Lilja 1998). In 1985, the day was noted in Swedish calendars, and eventually the celebration reached the preschools. The celebrations in preschools usually consist of making hearts and having conversations about love and friendship during circle time.

In terms of everyday nationalism, both Halloween and Valentine's Day are relatively new and imported holidays with a commercial background. In preschools, the teachers use Valentine's Day as an occasion to actualize so-called fundamental values stated in the curriculum. This connects to the responsibility to support the children in their development, which emphasizes that 'Education should give children the opportunity to develop their ability to express empathy and consideration for others by encouraging and strengthening their compassion for and insight into the situation of other people' and 'should be characterized by openness and respect for differences in people's perceptions and ways of life' (Skolverket 2019, 5). In line with this, Valentine's Day is a day when preschools highlight friendship and love, and stress values such as gender equality, and homotolerance. This indicates that Valentine's Day now has a stable position as everyday nationalism fortified by its connection to the task of instilling fundamental values.

New traditions in the name of diversity

The cultural heritage and the ensuing everyday nationalism constructed in Swedish preschools are slowly and continuously changing. The survey indicates the existence of both a common Swedish preschool cultural heritage and several local preschool cultural heritages that vary based on the backgrounds, local context, and interests of staff and parents in each preschool. The secular traditions that have gained a foothold in Sweden in recent decades are celebrated in about half of the preschools. Ramadan is only celebrated in preschools where there are children with a Muslim background. This differs from 'Rock Your Socks', a day that was introduced in preschools just after the construction of the questionnaire in 2015. It is not in the list of traditions that we asked about but is mentioned in several comments. Rock Your Socks is a day when you wear socks that don't match to celebrate diversity in all forms and predominantly in relation to physical and intellectual functionality. It has been adopted in many preschools regardless of the composition of the group of preschool children.

While Rock Your Socks and the new commercial holidays appear to be unproblematic, the survey results show that the religious symbolism and origin of some other traditions create uncertainty among preschool practitioners. Several comments express a concern that the staff might inadvertently discriminate against someone based on religion or other beliefs. In the survey, we asked whether the preschool practitioners knew about the children's religious background. Most of the

respondents answered that they did. The comments indicate that it is usually not the children's religious affiliation per se that the staff are interested in, but rather what it means for preschool practice. The need for special diets is both a reason and an opportunity to find out information about the children's religious background. More than 70% of the respondents answer that they learn about the religious background of the children when they start preschool, and that this information often is related to needs for special food. A few respondents state that they actively seek knowledge about religious representation among the children in the preschool, partly to be able to pay attention to holidays other than those understood as Swedish, and partly to be able to utilize the parents' knowledge about these festivals. It thus happens that preschool staff, as in Norwegian preschools, approach the subject of religion as a tool for creating an understanding of diversity rather than as part of a cultural heritage. Some of the comments indicate that only children and parents who are identified as non-Swedish are asked questions about religion. The religious background among the children and parents who are understood as Swedish does not seem to be considered important for the activities in the preschool. In the comments in response to the question of how they gain knowledge about the children's religious background, one respondent simply answered, 'Have no children with an immigrant background' and another wrote 'We almost never ask our Swedish families about religion'. Religion thus becomes something that is associated with those who are understood as 'the others', those who are positioned outside a Swedish majority, with the latter being perceived as those who have a Christian background but who at the same time are not assumed to be actively religious. The two different ways in which knowledge about the religion of 'foreign' children and families is perceived indicate two partly different attitudes to having multi-religious groups of children. One is about the existence of several religions as a problem and the other about the existence of several religions as a pedagogical resource. In the former case, topics such as religious stories, explanations of why holidays are celebrated, and the significance of religion in the lives of individuals and collectives are avoided. The reluctance to address religion as a form of diversity is in stark contrast to how preschools address diversity in relation to gender, sexuality, country of origin, and functionality. These subjects are often topics at circle time or in relation to everyday activities and incidents. When, on the other hand, the differing religious backgrounds of children and their guardians is seen as a resource, religious holidays and practices are made into teaching subjects in the preschools as markers and evidence of diversity. However, there is a striking difference between how traditions based in Lutheran Protestantism are desacralized and nationalized and how other religions are perceived and represented as religious and culturally different. In this way, the preschools reinforce an everyday nationalism where Lutheran practices are a given, non-religious, and natural part of the Swedish nation, whereas non-Protestant and non-Christian holidays are not only seen as religious but also as not necessarily Swedish.

Discussion and conclusion – everyday nationalism as a pedagogy of nation

In this article, we used a survey of traditions in Swedish preschools to explore everyday nationalism in Swedish preschools as pedagogy of nation (cf. Millei 2019, 2021). Considering the national, cultural, and religious diversity in the backgrounds of the preschool children, as well as among the staff, it is not evident how to form a common cultural heritage that is inclusive of this diversity. Furthermore, the national curriculum offers few clues on how this should be done in practice.

The survey shows that the Swedish preschool year is framed and marked by traditions with different origins, meanings, and associated activities: some with religious (Christian) origins, some that are borrowed from holidays that have entered Sweden based on commercial interests and then gained a foothold in Swedish society, and others that originate in Nordic customs. To a lesser extent, there are recently added holidays such as Eid al Fitir and Rock Your Socks. Together, all these traditions partake in the pedagogy of nation, where children are inserted into common histories, beliefs, and cultural practices, and thus point to what it means to be involved in and have knowledge of Swedish identity and culture.

The three major preschool holidays are Christmas, Easter, and Midsummer. Two of these correspond to the most central Christian holidays. In comments on how they observe these holidays, the preschool practitioners state that they downplay their religious significance. Instead, they define the holidays and the ensuing practices as Swedish traditions. What takes place is a culturalization and nationalization of Christian holidays. Simultaneously, the practitioners perform a Christianization, or what Buchardt (2015) calls a sacralization of the state, since the most dominant national holidays are Christian. It is not only banal nationalism (Billig 1995) but also ‘banal religion’, where the nation and religion are intertwined. The nationalization of these global Christian holidays as Swedish traditions is made possible and enforced by the surrounding society, where the holidays are manifested in media, decorations, and merchandise, in similar ways as in the preschools. This nationalization, or culturalization, of the Christian holidays obfuscates and diminishes their religious character and significance.

The reluctance to observe religious holidays from non-Christian religions, even if they are represented in the preschool group, indicates that the pedagogy of nation that most preschools undertake constructs the nation as saturated with Christian faith, history, and practices. The results do not indicate any similar culturalization or nationalization of holidays from non-Christian religions. This is the case even in the preschools who mark some of the holidays from non-Christian religions with different activities. The survey shows that some preschools (13%) pay attention to Ramadan as part of the cultural heritage. This, we argue, allows for a pedagogy of nation that points to a multi-religious and ethnically diverse nation with little or no emphasis on shared geographical roots.

Although the power of traditions to stabilize and form collectives is based on the presumption that they are practices with deep roots and are repeated over time, they are contingent and unstable, changing with each reiteration. The survey and our analysis do not show whether certain traditions might have been discarded from the preschool cultural heritage, and if so which. This is a consequence of the methodology of the survey. To find abandoned preschool traditions, it would be necessary to include retired preschool teachers as well as questions about changes in the preschool work with traditions and cultural heritage. Despite these methodological weaknesses, the survey reveals that traditions, and thus the construction of the cultural heritage, are subject to change. Here, we can see that the cultural heritage is open to including global, and presumably de-Christianized traditions, while non-Western traditions tend to be understood as religious and therefore difficult to insert into a common cultural heritage. The presumed religiosity therefore enforces the otherness of migrant parents, children, and staff, and positions them outside the culture of the nation. The reluctance and caution in relation to religion that many respondents express can be seen as an expression and effect of Swedish secularism (Brown 2013; Reimers 2019), which makes it easier to include secular traditions than religious (non-Protestant) traditions in the cultural heritage. In a situation where religion is understood as a private matter, religious practices become impossible as building blocks for a shared national community. The strong conception of religion as private makes it difficult for the preschool personnel to use the religious background of the children as a resource for enacting a Swedish cultural heritage.

Another way of making sense of the results of the survey can be found in the national preschool curriculum (Skolverket 1998/2016, 2018a) and the partly conflicting goals of, on the one hand, transferring and developing a shared national cultural heritage and, on the other hand, being ‘characterised by openness and respect for differences in people’s perceptions and ways of life’ (Skolverket 1998/2016, 5, 2018b, 5). These two goals are two sides of how Swedish preschools serve as arenas for diversity politics. Simultaneously, they point to a dilemma for all multicultural nations that strive both to acknowledge and respect cultural, religious, and national backgrounds of individuals and collectives, and to form a common identity and value base where diversity is an important element.

To conclude, diversity and cultural heritage are not necessarily in opposition. It is possible for preschools to enact inclusive everyday nationalism. This would imply practices that include different traditions and religions in the cultural heritage. Not only would this give better preconditions

for the integration of all children regardless of their religious or national background; it would also subvert hegemonic notions about the nation and what it means to identify as Swedish. By celebrating holidays, staff and children are brought together into a common context, a common history, and thus also the nation of Sweden. This, we claim, is a great possibility for the culturalization of Swedish children into a nation signified by diversity and openness. In the survey, we detect possibilities for this in how Lucia is modified in some preschools to be more welcoming for everybody. Another opening is the inclusion of Eid al Fitr or Nowruz in the preschool year, as well as the newly added Rock Your Socks. What is special about preschool is that the repetition and composition of traditions take place in a context where the participants do not choose each other; most are very young with limited experience of celebrating holidays and often have different cultural and religious backgrounds. Even though we recognize the dilemmas that the preschool personnel are faced with, we argue that these conditions make preschools into spaces where open and inclusive notions of nationality can be put to work.

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