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The tales told by Swiss popular customs

Life in a Stylized Form

The 700th anniversary of the Confederation, again showed that Swiss customs and folk traditions are still very popular. All over the country local festivals offered an outstanding opportunity to emphasise the links with history, tradition and the special characteristics of the homeland.

But what is, in fact, the “typical” and “genuine” that people look for in popular festivals – and not only in Switzerland’s anniversary year?

Popular customs and festivals are rituals in which the central themes and structures of a society are represented in a stylized form. A famous American ethnologist described them as “tales which people tell each other about themselves”. Although these tales are not simply a mirror of present-day reality, they do contain symbols and images which are of great importance for the society’s identity. Customs are therefore also found to be “genuine” and “typical” – but only as long as they do not deviate from a form laid down at some time in the past.

Pre-industrial world

What have the Swiss men and women of today to tell about themselves in the form of popular customs? If we survey the range of Swiss customs and traditions, it is noticeable that as a rule festival customs evoke a pre-industrial world that has long since disappeared. With their regional costumes and apparel the participants represent a rustic-peasant or an urban-bourgeois milieu of centuries ago. Primitive-looking masks represent a remote era which we imagine to have been savage and uncivilized. The whips, flails, bells, flaming torches, lanterns and carts which also figure frequently in these displays also have practically no significance in modern everyday life. In addition, many customs represent a life determined by the rhythm and forces of nature. The effect of night, the rotation of the seasons or the fascination of light and fire play an important part.

In this way the customs scenario and symbols create a sharp contrast to the present – and are frequently based on myths about the past. But precisely because they are simple and clear they give people living in a world of ever-increasing complexity a feeling of intimacy and security. These traditions and festivals also satisfy the yearning felt by modern man for elemental experiences.

Alpine pastoral images

While Switzerland differs little from other countries in this respect it does have its own special features, which distinguish it from its neighbours. The way the Swiss picture themselves in their traditional festivals and customs shows that many of them still feel they

that the alpine culture historically – and today more than ever – has actually been a living reality for only a small section of the Swiss population.

Myth of military readiness

The alpine myth which is cultivated in Swiss



Yodelling arouses a yearning for the ancient alpine pastoral culture.

have links with a supposedly ancient alpine pastoral culture, the symbols of which range from the alphorn and specific costumes to the cowbell and the cow itself. The folklorist Richard Weiss has endeavoured to explain why «everywhere one seeks something peculiarly Swiss or something generally Swiss, it assumes the Alpine form». According to Weiss, the Alps, as “Switzerland’s emotional backbone” are psychologically important. “The alpine Tell as the creator of liberty, the Rütli meadow, embedded in the mountains, as the birthplace of the Confederation, the notion of the alpine réduit as a national defence concept (...), all these are basic aspects of the Swiss existence.” That the Alps undergo a mythic transfiguration follows from the fact

popular customs is, however, also closely linked with the myth of the Swiss in military readiness which developed in the late Middle Ages in connection with the mercenary system. It is therefore not surprising that the military aspect is also reflected in various customs and festivals. This is not only apparent in the – in some cases – hierarchically organised active participants in traditional customs but also at carnival time festivities or even processions, which often contain military elements («Morgenstreich», historical uniforms, marches). Finally, independence and military readiness are also demonstrated by battle commemoration ceremonies and shooting festivals and meetings.



Celebrating democracy

Lastly, among the specialities – actually limited in number – in the range of Swiss popular customs are the manifestations of democracy on occasions such as the Landsgemeinden – the open-air voters’ gatherings – Swiss National Day on August 1 or specific election dates. The Landsgemeinden in particular are to some extent the scenically ritualised translation of the myth of an ancient alpine democratic society.

What the Swiss tell about themselves in their folk customs is not simply “ancient” and “always been like this”. Anyone who wonders how the Swiss popular customs and festivals developed their central themes soon realises that the customs are complexes which have grown historically and which continually integrate new elements. Their basis is neither frequently-mentioned superstition nor an

indefinable «national character». Rather, it is for the most part specific population groups and the social and political processes that stand behind them. Closer consideration reveals the fact that the present-day image of

the Swiss popular customs scene was largely moulded in the 19th century. Much of what was then fostered in the course of establishing the national state is today regarded as «genuinely Swiss». *Peter Pfrunder*

New Year's Eve in Appenzell Outer Rhodes

Where they see the old year out twice

Few, if any Swiss fail to mark the turn of the year, even if only by hanging up a new calendar or staying up until midnight. However, in many places in Switzerland people enthusiastically take part in customs held to see the old year out.

A striking and complex end-of-year tradition which has evolved into its present form over the years is the «Silvesterklausen» in Canton

Pretty “Kläuse”

The “Silvesterkläuse” are groups of six to fourteen men who on 31 December call at houses in their localities, choosing the route themselves and also visit the outlying and often remote farmsteads. Like their predecessors of centuries ago they are rewarded for their visit (usually with a glass of white wine and a good tip) but nowadays it is the people they visit who are really the recipients.

The “Kläuse” make their appearance costumed according to the taste and skill of each group, as “schöni” (pretty), “wüeschti” (ugly) or “schö-wüeschti” (pretty-ugly). The “schöni” tradition goes back to the beginning of the century. They wear velvet garments, white stockings, stylised pink leather masks and headgear decorated with glass pearls and glossy paper with scenes, usually carved out by hand, depicting popular customs and everyday life. Two members of the group represent “Wiibervölker” (womenfolk). They wear skirts and a kind of belt with eight large, round sleighbells, known as “Rolle”. Between these figures walk the “Mannevölker” (menfolk), each of whom carries two large cowbells, carefully attuned to each other. Attired thus the “Silvesterkläuse” make their way from house to house from dawn to midnight; at each house the “Rollen” and cowbells are rung rhythmically and as soon as the occupants appear “Zauerli” – the name given to the Appenzell-style yodelling – are performed. These arouse very deep feelings in many Appenzell-born people and, musically, are an almost material expression of the love of their native heath which is part of this one-time pastoral culture. The country folk who hear this yodelling by the “Silvesterkläuse” often show their emotions accordingly.

Ugly “Kläuse”

The other “Kläuse” are also divided into “Rollen” and cowbell carriers and they also bring their fellow citizens a New Year treat in



Old customs (pictured here: “Gansabhauet”) evoke a long-vanished, pre-industrial era. (Photos: Lookat)

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Appenzell Outer-Rhodes, «Silvester» being the German word for New Year's Eve. Especially during times of famine and until well into the 19th century the “Chlause” – as it is known locally – provided an opportunity for the poor to make house-to-house calls in disguise or masked and be given money or food after wishing the occupants the compliments of the season. The disparaging expression «Beggars’ Chlause» is a reminder of those times but since 1663, when the Church first forbade «tintinnabulation and noisy behaviour», this custom has developed into the most lavish and – in the view of many – the most attractive of New Year's Eve traditions.