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Autor:	Bendix, Regina
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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



Old customs (pictured here: "Gansabhatt") 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.

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), "wüeschi" (ugly) or "schö-wüeschi" (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" (men-folk), 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



A group of pretty "Kläuse" yodelling in front of a fine old house

the form of yodelling and bell-ringing. But the "wüeschi" (ugly) "Kläuse" are so called because of their frightening papiermaché masks which frequently incorporate animals' teeth and horns, recalling ancient memories of demons and forest spirits. This impression is heightened by "Gröscht", or costumes made from fir branches, straw and leaves. Although every Outer-Rhodes schoolchild is firmly convinced that the ugly "Kläuse" are pre-Christian in origin, the introduction of this type can definitely be placed in the 1940s and 1950s.

It was then that, influenced by popularised turn-of-the-century folklore theories, an enthusiastic senior schoolmaster in Urnäsch aimed to revive the "genuine form" of the "Silvesterklausen" custom. He was so successful in inspiring his classes that the ugly "Kläuse" soon became the most popular type, possibly not least because the "Gröscht" involved much less expenditure in time and money than was needed for the pretty "Kläuse".

Pretty-ugly "Kläuse"

Lastly, in the 1970s Urnäsch "Klausen" groups created the third type, the pretty-ugly "Kläuse". The exclusive use of natural materials like pine cones, bark or snail shells was adapted from the "uglies", while the artistic design of the "Gröscht" was inspired by the "pretties". The pretty-ugly "Kläuse", like the pretty ones, often spend more than a year in producing thematic carvings and in decorating the hats, jackets and trousers for an entire group, so that for really passionately active participants of the pretty and the pretty-ugly

groups, the "Silvesterklausen" custom is an absorbing all-the-year-round hobby. The ugly "Kläuse" on the other hand often rely on finding enough natural materials for their "Gröscht" before the first snowfall and sometimes costumes are not ready until the last moment.

Girls are allowed to take part in the children's groups but for adults the "Silvesterklausen" activity is strictly confined to men, in contrast to the "Landsgemeinde" – the annual open-air voters' assembly – to which women have now been admitted at last.



The masks of the "pretty-uglies" often feature pine cones, bark, branches and leaves.
(Photos: Hans Hürlemann)



Richly decorated headgear with scenes from traditional life

Old and New Silvester

In Urnäsch, which can boast what is probably the strongest and longest continuous "Kläuse" tradition, Silvester, or New Year's Eve, is actually celebrated twice. As in Herisau or Wald, the Urnäsch "Silvesterklauses" go from house to house on December 31, but Urnäsch is the only place which also still observes the "Old Silvester", on January 13. Like many Protestant areas, Appenzell Outer-Rhodes has refused to accept the Gregorian form of calendar for centuries and even in the 19th century calendars were published with the Julian and Gregorian dates side by side.

Despite being given frequent media attention "Silvesterklausen" is still a custom for the local population. Fortunately, its aesthetic aspect, deeply rooted in history, and its social functions remain hidden from even the most modern video camera.

Regina Bendix

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