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Switzerland: land of herb gardens and motorbike meetings

Switzerland is drawing up a list of its "thriving traditions". The survey has thrown up a few surprises, with some regions astonished at what is seen as tradition in other parts of the country. This has led to lively debates about the role of tradition in shaping identity. What does a conservative politician-cum-writer have to say about this? And what about a painter who paints nothing but cows? And why does a progressive yodeller keep stumbling over dogged traditionalism?

By Marc Lettau

Sometimes the baddies are actually the goodies. When men with bulging muscles take to the ring to engage in Swiss-style wrestling known as Schwingen, the enthusiastic crowd doesn't talk about the strong guys, but about the bad guys. And what about when one of the really bad guys throws his opponent onto his back with a powerful cross-buttock – what does he do then? Before raising his arms aloft to celebrate, he first dusts the sawdust off his opponent's shoulders. So, as the cheers ring out, he is really one of the good guys.

All cultures are familiar with martial arts, where brute force is made civilised more or less by competition rules. So, it's not the force part that makes Schwingen a typically Swiss sport. It is, to a large extent, the image of the winner and the fact that in his moment of triumph he shows respect for his defeated opponent. Obviously not all baddies are inherently good. The act of wiping the sawdust off the loser's shoulders is part of the tradition and of the values associated with Schwingen, which are passed down from one generation to the next. This

also resonates outside the wrestling ring. Only very few Swiss people actually engage in Swiss wrestling themselves. But they all know that – if they ever win anything – they should wipe the dirt off their opponent's back.

Trend towards the archaic

At the next Swiss Federal Wrestling Festival in 2013 – it is only held once every three years – the good sportsmanship of these bad guys is set to make even more of an impact than in previous years as the archaic appeal of the sport is increasingly making its mark on urban Switzerland. And the advertising industry won't shy away from putting the spotlight on the tough guy wrestlers themselves as Schwingen is likely to be definitively awarded UNESCO heritage status as an example of Switzerland's intangible cultural heritage before the next wrestling festival.

Switzerland is currently drawing up a list of its thriving traditions for UNESCO. In typical Swiss fashion, this is being done in as complex a way as possible. In some cantons, teams of experts have pored over the ques-

tion of what traditions and customs might be deemed worthy of UNESCO status, while in others ordinary people have been asked for their opinions. The Federal Office of Culture (FOC) is now busy working on documenting the 387 suggestions received and whittling them down to fewer than half that number. The final list will be submitted to UNESCO for review in April 2012.

A mind-bogglingly colourful mix

When researchers and folklorists come together to list ancient customs, and ordinary people say what they consider to be traditions, the result is a very colourful mix. The responses from the cantons initially threw up a rather mind-boggling array of suggestions. Before being whittled down by the team from the Federal Office of Culture, the suggestions ranged from mountaineering to oral irrigation, from chalet architecture to banking confidentiality, from monastic herb gardens to the Paléo Music Festival in Nyon, and from flag throwing and hunting for rock crystal to Switzerland's special virtue: cleanliness. The results have revealed

things that even Switzerland didn't know about itself, and some regions have been astonished to learn about what is seen as tradition in other parts of the country. The process has seen various practically untranslatable concepts discussed in a single breath. What on earth are Gansabhaut, Rabadán, Pschuuri, Troccas, Tschäggättä and Pfingsblüttlern all about? Schwingen, of course, is something we all understand. But now even the most tradition-conscious Swiss people are realising that Switzerland has many traditions that they know very little about as they are mostly other people's traditions.

One objective has already been achieved

In compiling the UNESCO list, one objective has already been achieved even before the publication of the final shortlist, says David Vitali, Head of the Culture and Society Department at the FOC: "We hope this process will raise awareness, firstly that these traditions exist and secondly that they have a valuable role to play." The FOC obviously hopes these thriving traditions will receive greater appreciation and believes the mere fact of compiling the list of suggestions has brought this one step closer. Folklorists and newspaper commentators think the resounding response the campaign has received is down to globalisation, which is changing the meaning of traditions. Vitali shares this view. These days, cultivating traditions is in no way simply about reducing them to a "patriotic phenomenon". Traditions have long been a key part of identity:



"Helping individuals find their place in a very pluralistic world."

What's the benefit of all this?

You could be forgiven for asking what the point is of the FOC compiling a list of traditions. Vitali acknowledges that drawing up the list does not directly help preserve traditions: "Traditions have to constantly evolve, otherwise they die out." Ultimately, this means that "the supporters of a tradition decide whether or not they want to pass that tradition on". It is therefore clear that neither the FOC nor UNESCO will be issuing any regulations regarding the customs and traditions. It is also clear that the process is not about protecting traditions and, at worst, "mummifying them". Traditions have to be able to evolve on their own: "Drawing up the list therefore only has an indirect impact, if anything, on the traditions."

A broad concept of tradition

Holzschneider, Appenzeller Witze, Köhlern, Jassen, Maskenschnitzen, Volkstänze, Vereinswesen, Gebetsheilen und Töfttreff (wood carvers, jokes from Appenzell, charcoal burners, a Swiss card game, mask carving, folk dances, clubs and societies, prayer healing and motorbike meetings). Can you really call hundreds of motorcyclists in leather jackets bombing along winding mountain roads and stopping for a beer on Hauenstein a typically Swiss tradition? Vitali advocates an open-minded, unprejudiced and all-embracing concept of what constitutes a tradition. He says one key character-



istic of a tradition is "something that is handed down from one generation to the next". A tradition calls for a clearly distinguishable group of followers; a vague sense of belonging is not enough to create a tradition. He goes on to say that tradition is therefore something that shapes the identity of a specific group of individuals. This can be said of the Hauenstein motorbike meeting, the Töfttreff Hauenstein: "For many the Töfttreff is a focal point." Since 1964, motorbike enthusiasts have been meeting up with their beloved two-wheeled machines every Thursday.

Vitali takes another, somewhat questionable, example to demonstrate the broad concept of tradition. Switzerland has put forward the way it deals with the dangers posed by avalanches for the UNESCO list. "This, too, is completely justified as the topic represents Switzerland's attitude to risks and dangers, which is firmly engrained in society."

Between tradition and folklore

Vitali believes some people's amazement at certain nominations is due to the fact that tradition is often equated with folkloric cus-



Poya art from the canton of Fribourg (photos above) was traditionally just a depiction of alpine scenery for decorating homes, but these days it is also in demand from art lovers

Switzerland's cultural heritage includes wrestling and bilingualism, which is part of everyday life in Biel as the signposts illustrate (photos left)

toms. Obviously customs will take up a great deal of space on UNESCO's list. However, the "traditional" customs are often much younger than many Swiss people think. Yes, really. Even some of the most uncontested candidates have only been flourishing for a matter of decades, rather than centuries. The alphorn, for example, was as good as forgotten at the beginning of the last century. It only began to re-emerge from 1930 onwards, in the wake of the developing tourism industry. In other words, a desire for alpine "authenticity" on the part of outsiders led the locals to unearth things they considered passé. This symbiotic relationship between tradition and tourism is quite delicate.

Advertisers sense a competitive edge

Companies promoting Swiss tourism are showing a keen interest in UNESCO's list of thriving traditions. The process has given rise to animated discussions among tourism experts as to how marketing traditions more strongly could lead to a competitive advantage, creating more value. The marketing organisation "Switzerland Tourism" also wants Swiss traditions to feature more heavily in its advertising campaigns from 2013 onwards. Vitali points out the opportunities in this area: "Tourism definitely has a role to play in conserving traditions, such as ancient arts and crafts or traditional forms of agricultural management." At the same time, tourism runs the risk of monopolising traditions and reducing them to a money-making factor. Vitali refuses to demonise the tourism industry,

however: "To a degree, many traditions only came about because of tourism. Tourism itself is a kind of Swiss tradition."

University lecturer and tourism expert Urs Wagenseil recently summarised roughly where the boundary might lie: "If you see an alphorn formation playing at the top of the Kleine Scheidegg with a Bernese mountain dog drafted in specially to sit in front of them, we would see that as kitsch. But for a Chinese person, that's a real piece of Switzerland before their very eyes."

The lone voice of opposition

We put a question to a representative of the Swiss People's Party (SVP) in Valais, a canton where tourism plays a major role: So, what's your view on tradition? A perfectly reasonable question since the SVP was the only political party to oppose the ratification of the UNESCO convention for the safeguarding of intangible cultural heritage. Does this mean that the conservative SVP, with its constant talk of traditions, is against the strengthening of traditions? "Quite the opposite", says Oskar Freysinger, National Councillor for the canton of Valais. It is not the UNESCO list that is the problem, he says, but the fact that yet again Switzerland is in the process of giving up the principle of being free to take its own decisions only to "subject itself to the objectives and agendas of a supranational institution". This means the SVP is holding firm to its "tradition" of seeing a loss of sovereignty lurking behind any dealings with an international organisation.

Folk music: Performed by alphorn players in the traditional way, and reinterpreted by Christine Lauterburg with the Swiss accordion

Below, the Swiss Post Office's controversial stamp to mark the 100th anniversary of the Swiss Yodelling Association

The cultural heritage list also includes the motorbike meeting at Hauenstein, which dates back to the 1960s (bottom left)



tion. In addition, for the SVP, any government commitment to cultural values smacks of patronising "state culture".

"Tradition is vital"

Of course, like anyone, the SVP is happy that the reputation of Swiss wrestlers, alphorn musicians and Jassen players might be given a boost. According to Freysinger, there is no intrinsic reason to criticise the Federal Office of Culture (FOC). "They're aiming in the right direction. It's a rich and diverse list that has been put together." The underlying position that globalisation underscores the importance of traditions is spot on in Freysinger's opinion. "Tradition is vital. Globalisation makes a lot of people feel that they no longer control their own fate. Tradition puts the focus back on roots." However, Freysinger also believes that traditions cannot be stage-managed: "Just because you play at being a cowboy doesn't make you a cowboy. Artificially staged customs do not possess any vitality."

Tradition passes on values

Freysinger's formula is clear: traditions produce values, values provide support and stability. And traditions stand for permanence and depth, not for just a stringing together of isolated moments. "The modern-day trend towards an ever more comprehensive state of timeless present simply creates the illusion of eternity." Tradition is more honest: "It doesn't deny death." Instead, it offers room for life through all its stages – germinating, blossoming, fading and dying. "Peo-

ple die, traditions remain." On what does he base his view? On the Fête-Dieu (Corpus Christi procession) in his home town of Savièse, for example, "an extraordinary affair that has incredible dynamism and stands for much more than religiosity, namely for community, which is built around specific values".

The debate on traditions will see a literary contribution from Oskar Freysinger in spring. Freysinger is basing his next novel in the world of the Suonen, the irrigation channels artfully constructed along the rock face in Valais. While it is a tradition of note, the construction of these channels has not found its way onto the UNESCO list. This is no slight on the Suonen; it simply underscores the fact that the sheer diversity of Swiss traditions makes a clear overview impossible.

Cows, cows... and more cows

While Oskar Freysinger is busy writing books, Francis Oberson is in his workshop north of the Alps painting cows on an enormous wood surface using a tiny brush. Oberson is a poya artist. He only paints cows. His paintings do not end up hanging in galleries, but adorn the walls of farmhouses in the Gruyère region. Oberson paints rows of cows winding their way up mountains and over alpine pastures and flower-filled meadows. He paints an idealised world, where no machinery, commercial aircraft or tourism infrastructure blights



the landscape. The same effect as idealised reality is produced by realistically painted images of the unrealistic – a painted reminder of what is good. What do such paintings have to do with tradition?

Poya painting is art, but not a personal form of art. It is art that belongs not to the artist, but to the region in which it "thrives". Oberson: "If you paint a picture for a farmer, then the farmer lives with that painting." The important element for Francis Oberson is, therefore, not the passing on of knowledge and values from one generation to the next, but the unconditional connection with a place. Poya paintings can only be painted by those who have their roots in those places. Oberson says that he observed and sketched cows for nine years before he saw himself as a poya painter. Since then, painting has been "like a prayer" for him, an attempt to "capture the light of the Gruyère region", a call to embrace the slower pace of life.

As already mentioned, the Federal Office of Culture does not want traditions to be "mummified" and advocates an open mindset. Traditions, including folklore-based customs, are seen by practically everyone as fine, colourful, enriching and even significant social structures. The growing interest of an urban audience in age-old traditions such as Schwingen reinforces this view. As do the few instances where very un-farmer-like bankers commission poya paintings. There

A WORLD FULL OF TRADITIONS

Chinese calligraphy, Spanish flamenco, Balinese temple dancing: UNESCO's aim is that such "intangible cultural heritage" remains alive in all its diversity. Switzerland has signed the UNESCO resolution on the protection and promotion of the diversity of cultural expressions along with 94 other countries. Consequently, it will have to submit a report to UNESCO on its cultural diversity in April 2012. To broaden the debate, the Federal Office of Culture prefers to talk of "thriving traditions" rather than "intangible cultural heritage". Whatever the terminology used, however, the ultimate goal remains the same: Switzerland, too, wants to contribute to a social climate where traditions are honoured and maintained. (MUL)

For the complete list of all 167 traditions considered, visit: www.bak.admin.ch



are, however, critical voices that challenge such homogeneity. The Berne-based musician and singer Christine Lauterburg is one such voice. She says that, for many years now, she has struggled with what she sees as an overly dogged take on traditions. As a yodeler who combines traditional songs with contemporary music, Lauterburg is exposed to constant hostility. "There is a small circle of 'gatekeepers' who almost live in a self-enclosed parallel world, in the holy grail of folk music. And that's a really narrow world that's not much fun. It doesn't bring people together; it excludes them." Lauterburg surmises that the "reactionary tendencies" and monopolising of folk culture within traditions are at their most extreme in yodelling.

Christine Lauterburg is the enfant terrible of folk singing, a "techno-yodeller" who is not looking for a power play with the Swiss Yodelling Association, the body that oversees "correct" yodelling. "I'm just not interested in joylessly going through the motions in my folk music. I want to contribute spontaneously to folk music that develops, that's alive, that laughs." She wants, for example, to be allowed to yodel and accompany herself on the violin at the same time – something the custodians of tradition will not accept. She says she has no interest in static, unchanging customs.

A stamp of approval?

This Berne-based yodeller even has the power to annoy when she is doing nothing. To mark the centenary anniversary of the Swiss Yodelling Association (in 2010), her image was used

Watch-making (photo right) is among the Swiss traditions worthy of protection, as is the "Fête-Dieu", the Corpus Christi procession in Savièse in the canton of Valais (photo below)



on a commemorative stamp from the Swiss Post Office – just eleven millimetres across, but big enough to spark a major fuss and some strong reactions from traditional yodellers: a "lapsed" follower, with her face on a stamp! It created "a real stink", says Lauterburg. Despite her negative experiences, she nevertheless hopes that the approach to tradition can

change in such a way as to make it "fun; to let it include young people, emphasise the elements that bring people together and eradicate those elements that exclude".

A snapshot in time

The conflicts that Lauterburg describes do not change the fact that yodelling is without a doubt part of Switzerland's "intangible cultural heritage". The UNESCO list has not one, but two entries for yodelling: one for Juuz yodelling from central Switzerland and the other for natural yodelling from Appenzell and Toggenburg. Why these two particular variations? According to David Vitali from the Federal Office of Culture, despite every effort to the contrary, the UNESCO list is simply a snapshot in time. It is not set in stone. The aim, he says, is to review it on a periodic basis and keep the debate on traditions and their value alive. This means that, whether they like it or not, the question of what their view is on tradition is one that is set to follow the "lapsed" yodeller, the painter who only paints cows and the politician-cum-writer for the rest of their lives.



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