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**Autor:** Remy, John M.  
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# LEOPOLD RÜTIMEYER AND THE DISCOVERY OF THE “GESCHULTEN DIEBE”, A LEGENDARY MASKED “MÄNNERBUND” OF THE LÖTSCHENTAL

JOHN M. REMY

In 1905 the Basle doctor Leopold Rütimeyer on a visit to the “Landesmuseum” in Zürich was captivated by several bark masks which were on display there (see illustrations). So wild, grotesque and infantile were these black personae with their hypnotic staring eyes, huge noses and predatory gleaming white teeth whose fearsomeness was enhanced by the tonal contrast between them and the dark colouring of the masks, that the casual observer might have been forgiven for mistaking them for masks acquired from some savage tribe in a faraway land. But Rütimeyer, who was also an experienced ethnographer and an intrepid traveller who had himself journeyed to exotic, tropical lands, was astonished to discover that they had in fact been fabricated in his own country, in the Lötschen Valley situated in a remote part of the High Alps in the canton of Wallis surrounded on three sides by steep glaciers.

After journeying to the area to gather more information about the masks – the first of many visits to the region over the following 18 years – Rütimeyer wrote an account of what he had found which appeared in the Leipzig geographical and ethnological magazine *Globus* in April 1907.<sup>1</sup>

The masks belonged to a fraternity called the “Roitscheggeten” (Smoke Chequers). They were worn together with a shaggy full-length black sheepskin costume and a large leather belt. The smoke-coloured and chequered appearance of the garb gave rise to the fraternity’s name. A crooked wooden staff also belonged to their apparel. According to a children’s fairy tale the sooty appearance of the brethren was attributable to their dwelling in smoky chimneys from which they emerged each Shrovetide. The “Smoke Chequers” paraded along the village streets, dancing energetically and leaping around. They bellowed like bulls, frightening the local women and children who would shut themselves in their houses to hide from them. What gave these lads dressed as bogey men the greatest fun was to chase and terrify any young girls they might encounter in the vicinity. For lads they were. The fraternity was made up exclusively of young single fellows and never initiated married

Convinced that these bizarre masks and the strange customs with which they were associated must have a deeper meaning which had long been forgotten by the local inhabitants, Rütimeyer resolved to uncover it. The extraordinarily primitive character of the masks suggested to him that they were of great antiquity, a view which was strengthened when he was informed that according to local myth they were regarded by the residents of the valley as part of a tradition dating back to prehistoric times. They had, so the story went, belonged to a band of thieves who dwelt in the dense forests on the southern escarpment of the Lötschen Valley. Those who joined the band had first to prove their prowess and agility by jumping across a mountain stream carrying a heavy bag of loot. It was for this reason, local people recalled, that the robbers were known as “die geschulten Diebe” (the “Well-Schooled Thieves”). Wearing their fearsome-looking masks, clad in sheepskins and filthy rags from which hung numerous little tinkling bells, and armed with heavy cudgels, the band of thieves was said to have carried on a reign of terror each Shrovetide against the local villagers, carrying out daring raids on the isolated hamlets of the valley and waylaying their inhabitants. Such marauding persisted, according to the myth, for many hundreds if not thousands of years, ceasing only in the 17th Century.

Searching for a satisfactory explanation of the significance of the rituals of the “Smoke Chequers” and the myth of the “Well-Schooled Thieves”, Rütimeyer turned for guidance to theories developed by three comparative ethnologists (Völkerkundler), two of them Germans and one an Englishman. The most important of these, whose work is our chief concern here, was that of the recently deceased scholar Heinrich Schurtz (1863–1903), who at the turn of the century had made a study of male bonding and all-male groups in “primitive” societies. The others were Adolf Bastian’s method of drawing ethnographic parallels and Edward Burnet Tylor’s theory of the survival of archaic cultural strata.<sup>2</sup> Schurtz, who was educated at Leipzig and spent most of his short career working at the Museum of Ethnology in Bremen, was the first person to undertake a global investigation of men’s associations – or “Männerbünde” (men’s leagues, fraternities) as he called them – and to develop a socio-cultural theory of their origin and evolutionary significance. He first began to outline his ideas on male bonding in his *Urgeschichte der Kultur* (1900), before elaborating them more fully in *Altersklassen und Männerbünde* (Age Cohorts and Men’s Leagues), subtitled *Eine Darstellung der Grundformen der Gesellschaft* (An Exposition of the Elementary Forms of Society), which appeared in 1902.<sup>3</sup> Schurtz argued that there were two main types of social groups: those such as the family and the clan which were based on blood ties, and those founded on ties of mutual solidarity, by which he understood primarily men’s leagues and ■ 127



age cohorts made up of males of different age groups. This reflected his belief that sex (or what we would now call gender) and age were the two chief determinants in the creation of those human associations which people joined voluntarily rather than being born into. “Männerbünde” and male age cohorts resulted from what Schurtz characterised as men’s more highly developed “Geselligkeitstrieb” (gregarious drive), which had evolved in conjunction with the Struggle for Existence. The family and the clan, by contrast, were the outcome of the “Geschlechtstrieb” (reproductive drive) which although certainly present among men was much stronger among women with their maternal instinct. Schurtz concluded from this formulation that while young unmarried men belonged in the “Männerbund”, a woman’s place was in the family home. While married men in early societies resided in the family home, they too continued to spend much of their time in a male bonding group. Men’s “Geselligkeitstrieb” had led them to create a wide range of single-sex institutions, above all the “men’s house” where the young men of a tribe lived separately from the women and children after outgrowing the maternal family and which the older men frequented on a part-time basis, the pubertal initiation rituals which involved various tests of strength and endurance, assimilated young men to the spirits of the tribal ancestors and conferred membership of the “Männerbund”, and the men’s secret societies into which many fraternities evolved with their terrifying Cult of the Dead.

The aim of this paper is to show how Rütimeyer used Schurtz’s investigation of the “Männerbünde” – which in spite of its antifeminist presuppositions and the inspiration which it later gave to right-wing political theorists in Germany can nonetheless now be seen as a pioneering study of men as a gender – in combination with concepts developed by Bastian and Tylor, to provide him with an explanatory model of the all-male formations which he had discovered in his homeland. It then proceeds to assess the wider significance of Rütimeyer’s application of Schurtz’s theory. Our concern here is purely historical and does not extend to a survey of more recent ethnological and folkloristic studies of the *Roitscheggeten*.<sup>4</sup>

The systematic study of men’s associations in Germany began in the 1850s. This was in a period which saw the advent of both comparative ethnology, in which Bastian played a prominent role which paralleled that of his friend Tylor in England, and of “Volkskunde”, which, inspired largely by the notion of folklore which had been delineated by English scholars shortly before, was developed by Wilhelm Heinrich Riehl, who gave it a “völkisch”-nationalist colouring. In the mid-1850s, the philologist Oskar Schade wrote two articles in which he looked at all-male associations and their rituals in Germany and



which he examined were the initiation rituals of German knights, peasants, students and trade apprentices during the Middle Ages, some of which had survived into his own day.<sup>5</sup> A further contribution was made in 1893 by the Bonn philologist Hermann Usener, who attempted to trace various affinities between the customs of German village associations of young men and the cultic fraternities of ancient Greece and Rome.<sup>6</sup>

By the turn of the century there was increasing interest in the folk customs of traditional and festive mask-wearing fraternities, particularly in the Alps. Among the studies of such associations were those carried out by the Swiss ethnologist and folklorist Eduard Hoffmann-Krayer and the local Hessian historian Julius Reinhard Dieterich.<sup>7</sup> In two articles published in the newly-established *Schweizerisches Archiv für Volkskunde* which he edited, Hoffmann-Krayer looked at the masks worn during the “Fastnacht” (Shrovetide) and at the nocturnal shamming rituals and other examples of “Volksjustiz” (folk justice) carried out by the “Knabenschaften” (lads’ associations) in German-speaking Switzerland. In a similar vein in an article in the *Hessische Blätter für Volkskunde* Dieterich wrote of the mask-wearing “Narrenbruderschaften” (brotherhoods of fools) which in medieval times had held “Geckengerichte” (clowns’ courts) in Hessen during the New Year and Shrovetide festivities. The fraternities discussed by Hoffmann-Krayer and Dieterich had much in common with other male associations which flourished during the Middle Ages such as the ecclesiastical brotherhoods, monastic orders and townsmen’s guilds. It was suggested that these may well have had a common origin in the sacrificial priesthoods and blood brotherhoods of Germanic antiquity at a time when judicial and religious rituals had not yet been differentiated.

Hoffmann-Krayer’s and Dieterich’s studies provide an example of an approach to “Volkskunde” which sought the origins of particular German (or Swiss-German) folk customs in an archaic Germanic past, but did not attempt to draw analogies beyond the central European context. Wilhelm Hein, on the other hand, who made a study of the activities of a rural mask-wearing young men’s association of the Salzburg area of Upper Austria in 1899, was struck by the resemblance of the dance, devil and secret society masks worn by the youths performing at the carnivals to those of tribal peoples, and explicitly argued that for this reason they should not be viewed as specifically central European artifacts but as examples of a worldwide and universal phenomenon.<sup>8</sup>

What inspired this broader approach more than anything else was precisely the practice which had been employed by comparative ethnologists like Bastian of drawing ethnographic parallels. This concept was most fully developed by Richard Andree, a member of Bastian’s school. When Andree, who made contributions to both comparative ethnology and “Volkskunde”, extended his ■ 129

survey of ethnographic parallels in 1889 he concentrated much of his attention on the comparative categorisation of masks, making the first substantive consideration of a subject which was to attract a phenomenal amount of interest in the German-speaking countries over the course of the following half-century and was a central motif in the study and later political mythologization of the "Männerbünde". In the majority of cases which Andree cited the masks were worn by men.<sup>9</sup> Among the striking parallels highlighted by Andree was that between the masks donned for judicial purposes by the participants in the Bavarian "Haberfeldtreiben" and by members of the Melanesian "Duk-Duk".<sup>10</sup> Their curiosity awakened, comparative ethnologists, among whom was Schurtz, proceeded to investigate the masks of the "Naturvölker", while archaeologists focused on those of the peoples of classical antiquity, and by the late 1890s German, Swiss and Austrian "Volkskundler" were taking an increasing interest in the mask-wearing village fraternities which could still be encountered on festive occasions in German-speaking central Europe, above all in the Alps.

These developments coincided with the rise of a movement in the German-speaking countries dedicated to promoting interest in "Volkskunde" among the general public as well as among university-educated professionals. Beginning with the founding of the Berlin Society for "Volkskunde", the following year, a whole series of associations and periodicals devoted to the study of the customs and traditions of the common folk emerged in rapid succession. "Folk" referred to peasants, artisans, and the rural "Mittelstand" (the old, small town middle class), and was counterposed to "Gebildete" (the educated stratum). "Volkskunde" societies were founded in Silesia (1894), Austria (1895), Bohemia (1896), Saxony, Switzerland and Hessen (1897), followed in the late 1890s by Bavaria, Baden, Mecklenburg und Braunschweig. Some of these associations attracted a large membership: the Hessian society for example, quickly grew into an ambitious organisation boasting some 700 members. This rapid growth of interest in the study of the German "Volk" coincided with the proliferation of bourgeois associations of many different kinds all over German-speaking central Europe which testified to the rapid expansion of the public sphere in the 1890s as well as to the rise of nationalism.<sup>11</sup> Inspired by "Völkerkunde", an increasing number of folklorists began to adopt a broader comparative approach with a global perspective incorporating the ethnological study of "primitive" peoples. This became known as "vergleichende Volkskunde".

Hein was among the representatives of this tendency, whose chief theoretical innovation was the adoption of the practice of drawing ethnographic parallels. His work provided the stimulus for further field research into other festive masked men's associations in the Alpine area. One of the most flamboyant of

130 ■ these were the exotically attired troupes of mask-wearing male dancers known



*Leopold Rütimeyer (1856–1932) (Der Basler Arzt Leopold Rütimeyer, Basel 1961).*



as the “Perchten”, which held processions on festival days and formed part of the folk tradition of the Salzburg region. The Munich-based ethnologist Marie Andree-Eysn made a number of visits to the area to study these formations and their customs. Most participants wore bark masks variously displaying large protruding eyes, long teeth and horns, so that they resembled the faces of real or mythical beasts. Black sheepskins and a wide leather belt hung with bells which were rung very loudly while the procession was in progress also belonged to their costume, creating a “truly archaic and grotesque effect”.<sup>12</sup>

The masks of the “Perchten” were very similar in appearance to those described by Hoffmann-Krayer and in Andree-Eysn’s view belonged to “a wider circle of Germanic masked processions” of, in her estimation, great antiquity, which could be encountered in various places on German and neighbouring soil, particularly in the Alps.<sup>13</sup> Common to all these processions was the wearing of dance, devil and animal masks, together with the use of a phallic device with which to strike young women. Extra-European ethnographic parallels suggested that the bizarre masks and the loud noise which were essential features of it were meant to scare away any malevolent daemons which the participants feared might attempt to thwart it.



Bestial and diabolical though the masks of the "Perchten" certainly were, however, they were by no means the rudest and most archaic specimens still in use by the carnival brotherhoods of the Alps at the beginning of the 20th century, as Rütimeyer was about to show. Although the "Smoke Chequers" had some features in common with other folk fraternities in Switzerland, they and their masked customs were much more ancient than any others which had been discovered up to that time, he believed.

Born in Basle the son of a prominent zoologist and palaeontologist, after studying first at the local university and then, like Schurtz, at Leipzig, Rütimeyer (1856–1932) completed a doctorate in medicine in 1881, launching him on a career as a leading specialist in illnesses of the digestive tract in both Switzerland and Germany. In February 1907, just a few weeks before the appearance of his *Globus* article, he was appointed a professor in the medical faculty at Basle. While a student there Rütimeyer had joined a fraternity, the *Zofinger Society*, with which he was to have a lifelong association, becoming the central figure at the convivial meetings of its "Tafelrunde" (round table). The value which he placed on the male sociability and closely-knit intimacy offered by this circle of intellectuals and professional men is underlined by the observation of Werner Stöcklin in his assessment of Rütimeyer's work as an ethnologist that: "Year in, year out, Saturday nights were out of bounds for his family and medical practice, being reserved for these fellows of the same age."<sup>14</sup>

In addition to his work as a doctor, Rütimeyer soon made a name for himself as a comparative ethnologist, achieving considerable recognition abroad, particularly in Britain.<sup>15</sup> He first began to evince a serious interest in "Völkerkunde" in 1889 when he travelled to Egypt with the cousins Paul and Fritz Sarasin, two anthropologists who had been childhood friends of his and were fellow members of the *Zofinger Society*. The expedition collected artifacts for the Ethnological Museum in Basle and Rütimeyer wrote an account of it for *Globus*, to which, like Schurtz in the same period, he became an occasional contributor.<sup>16</sup> In 1901 he produced two influential papers on West African stone idols,<sup>17</sup> and the following year, around the same time that Schurtz's *Altersklassen und Männerbünde* was appearing, took part in an expedition with the Sarasins to Ceylon (Sri Lanka) in order to study the Veddhās, an aboriginal tribe of cave-dwellers still living in the Stone Age. These "savage sons of the forest", as he romantically described them, made a deep impression on him, and he felt awed and fascinated to be in the presence of what he was convinced was a species of "primordial humanity".<sup>18</sup>

It was ironic that Rütimeyer's quest for the origins of human culture, which had taken him halfway round the world to exotic tropical lands, was to find its

*Masked costume of the “Roitscheggete” (Leopold Rütimeyer, «Über Masken und Maskenbräuche im Lötschental», Globus 91 [1907]).*



civilisation. Not surprisingly in view of his background in “Völkerkunde”, his personal familiarity with ancient cultures and special interest in primaeval peoples and their artifacts, when he began to concern himself with the “Volkskunde” of German Switzerland to which he henceforth devoted most of his attention as an ethnologist, it was not simply as an Indo-Germanic comparativist like Usener but as a global comparativist making ample use of ethnographic parallels.

Each of the principal themes which played a part in the Lötschen Valley drama had its counterparts among tribal peoples, Rütimeyer argued. Comparative ethnologists had shown that masked customs were very common in all parts of the world. They were associated above all, as Schurtz had demonstrated, with pubertal initiations and men’s secret societies, and particularly with the celebration of the Cult of the Dead practised during tribal festivals. It was significant, for example, that only youths and young single men wore the masks. Among many different peoples it was customary for this age cohort to ■ 133



don masks under cover of which they got up to all kinds of mischief at the time of the spring carnival. In former times this had often included various acts of violence and stealing, making a great commotion, and frightening women and children. Such behaviour went unpunished and it may well have been that the miscreants had a recognised "right" to act in this anti-social way.

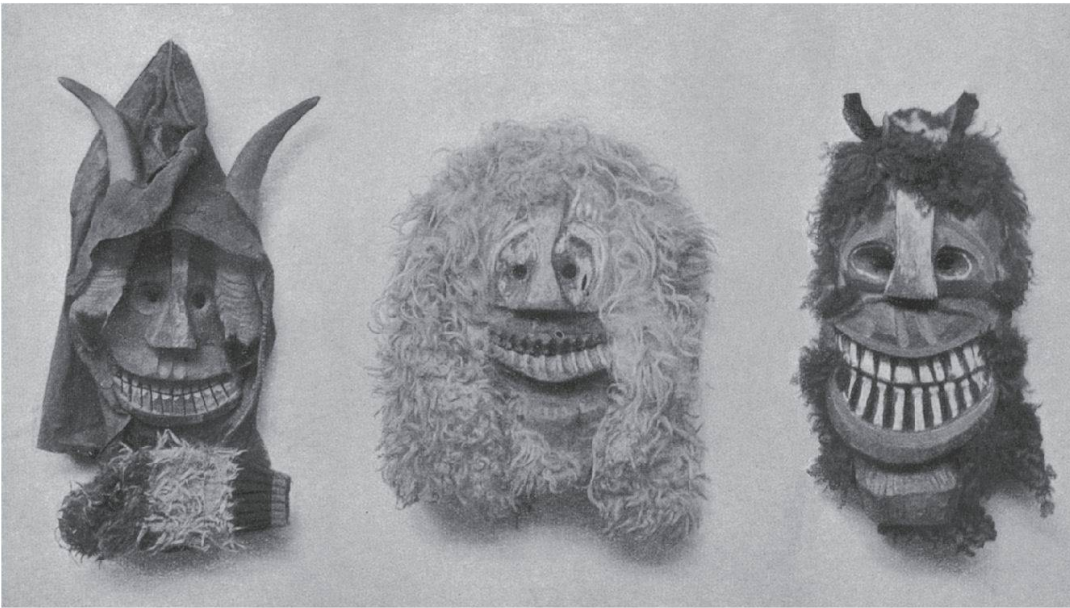
That the "Well-Schooled Thieves" of the myth were no ordinary criminals was clear to Rütimeyer. Normal robbers do not announce their arrival at the scene of their crime by making as loud a noise as possible with cow bells, he argued plausibly. Furthermore, it was quite inconceivable that the local inhabitants, fearless mountain folk that they were, would have allowed a band of common brigands to prey on them for even a short length of time, let alone for thousands of years, without bringing them to book, Rütimeyer maintained. Moreover, none of the local histories, which scrupulously chronicled the presence of outsiders such as Gypsies in the valley, mentioned the legendary thieves. The only credible explanation was that the narrative recited the activities of a primitive cultic secret society which held periodic initiation rituals coinciding with carnival time and involving the plunder of local villages without the perpetrators risking punishment.

"Vergleichende Völkerkunde" (comparative folklore) provided abundant evidence, Rütimeyer noted, of cohorts of youths forming robber bands in conjunction with their initiation rituals. In Liberia, for example, groups of lads being put through their paces in the tropical *primaeval* forest, led by their teachers, the masked "So-bahs", would raid nearby villages after dark, stealing anything they could lay their hands on, before carrying their haul back to their hideaway. A further example was the awe-inspiring masked secret society known as the "Oro", which operated among the Yoruba in another region of West Africa. Its approach was heralded by the sombre tones of the bull-roarer, preyed on the local populous by night, stealing hens and other easily transportable animals with impunity.

The motif of jumping over a stream while heavily laden might be interpreted as a classic initiatory feature having many parallels in tribal societies. The Ostchukayana Indians of eastern Brazil had a similar trial of strength and daring. In order to qualify to join the tribal "Männergesellschaft", youths had to hurl a heavy block of wood which they carried on their shoulders at a given target while running. The successful performance of this task was also a precondition for being permitted to marry. Schurtz had shown in his *Urgeschichte der Kultur* that the chief purpose of such tests of bravery and perseverance was, as Rütimeyer put it, "to weed out weaklings and to admit only strong fellows into the "Männerbund".<sup>19</sup>

134 ■ The "Smoke Chequers" penchant while wearing their hideous masks of charg-





Masks of the "Roitscheggete" (Leopold Rütimeyer, *Ur-Ethnographie der Schweiz*, Basel 1924).

ing about, roaring like bulls, and frightening women, also conformed to a pattern of activities which had many parallels among "primitive" youth cohorts, Rütimeyer claimed. In West Africa and Melanesia, where, as Schurtz had shown, secret societies wielded enormous power over women based on terror and fear of occult forces, when the bull-roarer sounded and the masked men appeared on the streets any woman who failed to retreat behind closed doors in time and was caught out in the open was liable to be manhandled or even killed. To stand in the path of the "Oro" was not only to defy a terroristic fraternity but to incur the wrath of the all-powerful ruling spirit of the forest who lent it his name and whose will its members loyally executed. One of the Melanesian counterparts of the "Oro", the much-feared "Tamate", whose murderous character Schurtz had noted, provided another classic example.

A further feature which had its parallels in the narratives telling of the practices of extra-European tribal men's leagues was that of the forest hideout, which Rütimeyer saw as a "primitive" men's house. Savage tribesmen often constructed their secret hut, where the ancestral spirits were believed to reside and the fraternity masks were kept, deep in the primordial forest. In the myths and rituals revolving around bands of masked men the latter were almost invariably depicted as forest-dwellers. Again, this was the case in West Africa and Melanesia, where, separated off from the rest of the community for a period which in some cases could last for as long as 7 years, youths were initiated and educated. Schurtz had pointed out in his *Altersklassen und "Männerbünde"*, ■ 135

which Rüttimeyer judged to be an “important work”,<sup>20</sup> that the men’s or bachelors’ house did not have to be a permanent building but could just as well be a temporary structure which was dismantled or abandoned when it was no longer required. Such dens were not at all uncommon among the “Naturvölker” and still survived here and there among the “Kulturvölker”. Rüttimeyer thought it most poignant that among the vestigial men’s houses which Schurtz had located in Europe were examples from the Austrian Tirol used by local young single men as dance halls, meeting places and court-houses.

The still-extant masked customs of the remote Alpine community of the Lötschen Valley corresponded, Rüttimeyer argued, “feature for feature with certain West African and Melanesian parallels, so that instead of the Yoruba, the Cameroons and the Banks Islands we only need to substitute the Lötschen Valley to recognise the analogous relationships”.<sup>21</sup> These tribal parallels strongly suggested that the “Well-Schooled Thieves” were not an isolated occurrence but one example of a phenomenon which had once been universal. They had been a primitive secret society whose youthful members normally lived with their relatives but who periodically hid out in the forests where they celebrated their “mysteries” and, protected by masks which they believed embodied the power and authority of the spirits, carried out daring plundering forays into the villages below.<sup>22</sup>

Rüttimeyer concluded that the masquerades which still took place in the Lötschen Valley were evidence that in the distant past a “primordial social institution”, the primitive men’s secret society, whose characteristic features Schurtz had been the first to describe, had existed in the area.<sup>23</sup> The Stone Age inhabitants of the Lötschen Valley were identified by this palaeontologist’s son as belonging to the primaeval species known to archaeologists as “homo alpinus”. In common with their cultural cousins in West Africa and Melanesia, they had been an extremely primitive “Naturvolk”. Their local “Lötschentaler Knabenschaft”, although essentially the same kind of single sex grouping as those researched by Hoffmann-Krayer and Andree-Eysn, belonged to a much more ancient cultural stratum than the supposedly Germanic fraternities described by them. Its monstrous masks might be seen as the “Leitfossilien” of a primitive prehistoric epoch. They had survived down the ages and could still be seen each carnival time covering the faces of the “Smoke Chequers”.<sup>24</sup>

As to the wider significance of Rüttimeyer’s article, it represented one example among many others of the application of Schurtz’s theory of the “Männerbund” and the age cohort of male youth as the evolutionary building blocks of society and its increasing acceptance by scholars representing a wide variety of academic disciplines in the German-speaking countries before 1918. These included,



in addition to the two branches of ethnology which constituted Rüttimeyer's chief areas of interest: sociology; cultural history; classical, Germanic and Indo-Germanic philology; comparative religious studies; comparative jurisprudence; "Völkerpsychologie" (ethno-psychology) and psychoanalysis. Academic interest in the theory of the "Männerbund" increased in the Weimar period, expanding into new areas such as the comparative science of education. Such interest became increasingly combined with the theory's utilisation as a fratriarchal ideology by the political right in Germany.

This process began shortly before the First World War and accelerated apace after 1918. It paralleled the proliferation of a plethora of new types of men's associations and new forms of male bonding manifested above all in the rise of male-separatist and homoerotic tendencies within the middle-class youth movement, in the mushrooming of paramilitary organisations across the entire political spectrum and of terroristic secret societies of self-styled political outlaws on the far right. The ideology provided a justification for the exclusion of women from "men's organisations" during a period when feminism was enjoying growing support and women were entering the public sphere, including the political arena – a development of immense importance for the radical right in terms of the shift in power relations between the genders which it signified – together with occupations which had hitherto been all-male preserves. The "Männerbund" concept went on to acquire a wide currency in the National Socialist movement and in the Third Reich. Among the Nazi leaders who had some familiarity with it were Himmler, Rosenberg, Röhm and Darré. From 1933 onwards, however, a number of vociferous political controversies developed around the "Männerbund" and its relationship to race, homosexuality, and the place of women in Hitler's Third Reich. These remained largely unresolved when the outbreak of the Second World War put an effective end to such inner-party disputes.

#### Notes

- 1 Leopold Rüttimeyer, «Über Masken und Maskenbräuche im Lötschental (Kanton Wallis)», *Globus* 91 (1907), 201–204, 213–218. Rüttimeyer made further contributions to the theme in «Über einige archaische Gerätschaften und Gebräuche im Kanton Wallis und ihre prähistorischen und ethnographischen Parallelen», *Schweizerisches Archiv für Volkskunde* 20 (1916), 283–372; Rüttimeyer, *Ur-Ethnographie der Schweiz. Ihre Relikte bis zur Gegenwart mit prähistorischen und ethnographischen Parallelen*, Basel 1924 (Schriften der Schweizerischen Gesellschaft für Volkskunde, Bd. XVI). I would like to thank Professor Richard J. Evans, Acting Master of Birkbeck College, University of London, and Martin Lengwiler, Zurich, for their help in the preparation of this paper.
- 2 Rüttimeyer, «Über Masken und Maskenbräuche», p. 214.
- 3 Heinrich Schurtz, *Urgeschichte der Kultur*, Leipzig, 1900. Ibid., *Altersklassen und Männer-*



bünde. *Eine Darstellung der Gesellschaft*, Berlin, 1902. Remarkably little scholarly attention has been devoted to the study of the gender politics of the Männerbund in the German-speaking countries between the turn of the century and 1945. The little work that has been done has either portrayed the Männerbund as an exclusively homoerotic phenomenon or seen Schurtz as a teleological precursor of the Third Reich which was founded some 30 years after his death. The first tendency is represented above all by George L. Mosse, *The Crisis of German Ideology. Intellectual Origins of the Third Reich*, London 1966, the second by Jürgen Reulecke, «Das Jahr 1902 und die Ursprünge der Männerbund-Ideologie in Deutschland» in Gisela Völger and Karin von Welck (eds.), *Männerbände – Männerbünde. Zur Rolle des Mannes im Kulturvergleich*, Bd. 1, Köln 1990, 3–10. The various contributions in this compilation can be described as at best preparatory. Many have a superficial character and are replete with factual errors. I am currently preparing a three-volume history of the Männerbund concept in Germany. The first volume, which concludes in 1920, highlights the significance of Schurtz's work and shows that his gender-political conceptualisation evoked a wide resonance among intellectuals in Wilhelmine Germany that had nothing to do with either homoeroticism or proto-fascist thinking.

- 4 On the latter see: Werner Bellwald, *Zur Konstruktion von Heimat. Die Entdeckung lokaler «Volkskultur» und ihr Aufstieg in die nationale Symbolkultur. Die Beispiele Hérens und Lötschen (Schweiz)*, Sitten 1997 (Walliser Kantonsmuseen, Ethnologische Reihe 5).
- 5 Oskar Schade, «Vom deutschen Handwerksleben in Brauch, Spruch und Lied», *Weimarisches Jahrbuch für deutsche Sprache, Literatur und Kunst* 4 (1856), 241–354. Ibid., «Über Jünglingsweihen. Ein Beitrag zur Sittenkunde», in *ibid.* 6 (1857), 241–416.
- 6 Hermann Usener, «Über vergleichende Sitten- und Rechtsgeschichte», in *XLII. Versammlung deutscher Philologen und Schulmänner in Wien 1893*, Leipzig 1894, 22 ff.; reproduced in revised form in *Hessische Blätter für Volkskunde* 1 (1902), 195–228.
- 7 Eduard Hoffmann-Krayer, «Die Fastnachtsgebräuche in der Schweiz», *Schweizerisches Archiv für Volkskunde* 1 (1897), 47–57, 126–142, 177–194, 257–283; *ibid.*, «Knabenschaften und Volksjustiz in der Schweiz», *ibid.* 8 (1904), 81–99, 161–178; Julius Reinhard Dieterich, «Eselritt und Dachabdecken», *Hessische Blätter für Volkskunde* 2 (1902), 87–112.
- 8 Wilhelm Hein, «Das Huttlerlaufen», *Zeitschrift des Vereins für Volkskunde* 1899; cited and discussed by Marie Andree-Eysn, «Die Perchten im Salzburgerischen», *Archiv für Anthropologie* N. F. 3 (1905), 122–141; quote at 122. For a comprehensive survey of the literature on folk masks in the Alpine region and across German-speaking central Europe up to 1932 see: Karl Meuli, «Maske, Maskereien», in *Handwörterbuch des deutschen Aberglaubens*, hg. v. Hanns Bächtold-Stäubli, Eduard Hoffmann-Krayer, Bd. 5, Berlin 1932/33, 1743–1851.
- 9 Richard Andree, *Ethnographische Parallelen und Vergleiche. Neue Folge*, Stuttgart 1889, 107–165.
- 10 *Ibid.*, 134–140.
- 11 Albrecht Dieterich, «Über Wesen und Ziele der Volkskunde», *Hessische Blätter für Volkskunde* 1 (1902), 169–194.
- 12 Andree-Eysn, «Die Perchten», 140: eine «durchaus altertümliche groteske Erscheinung».
- 13 *Ibid.*, 135: «in einem größeren Kreis von germanischen Maskenumzügen».
- 14 Werner Stöcklin, *Der Basler Arzt Leopold Rütimeyer (1856–1932) und sein Beitrag zur Ethnologie*, Diss. Med. Basel 1961, 23; «jahraus, jahrein war der Samstagabend unantastbar für Familie und Arztpraxis, diesen Altersgenossen gewidmet».
- 15 *Ibid.*, 28.
- 16 Leopold Rütimeyer, «Eine Reise von Suez nach dem Sinai», *Globus* 57 (1890), 161–167, 180–184, 195–198; Stöcklin, *Rütimeyer*, 23. For a bibliography of Rütimeyer's works see Stöcklin, *Rütimeyer*, 91.
- 17 Leopold Rütimeyer, «Über westafrikanische Steinidole. Vorbericht», *Globus* 83, (1901), 14–15; *ibid.*, «Über westafrikanische Steinidole», *Internationales Archiv für Ethnographie* 14, 195–215.

- 18 Leopold Rütimeyer, «Die Nilgaweddas in Ceylon», *Globus* 83 (1903), 201–207, 220–223, 261–267; quote at 202; Stöcklin, *Rütimeyer*, 26. Rütimeyer speaks of «ursprünglicher Menschheit».
- 19 Schurtz, *Urgeschichte der Kultur*, 119; Rütimeyer, *Ur-Ethnographie der Schweiz*, 367; «Schwächlinge abzuweisen und nur Tüchtige in den Männerbund aufzunehmen».
- 20 Rütimeyer, «Über Masken und Maskenbräuche», 214: «wichtigen Werk».
- 21 Ibid., 217; «Zug für Zug gewissen westafrikanischen und melanesischen Parallelen entsprechen, so dass wir nur statt Yoruba, Kamerun, Banksinseln Lötschental zu setzen brauchen, um die entsprechenden Verhältnisse zu erkennen».
- 22 Ibid.
- 23 Ibid., p. 214; eine «uralte soziale Einrichtung».
- 24 Ibid., p. 217.

## SUMMARY

The paper tells the story of the discovery by the Basle doctor and ethnographer Leopold Rütimeyer (1856–1932) of a legendary masked fraternity in the Lötschental (Canton Wallis), high in the Swiss Alps, in the early years of the twentieth century, and how he interpreted the myths and rituals associated with it. The fraternity had two names corresponding to its dual aspect. As a mythical band of robbers it was called the “die geschulten Diebe” (the “Well-Schooled Thieves”), and as a still-extant ritual association of young lads it was known as the “Roitscheggeten” („Smoke Chequers”). Rütimeyer wrote an account of his discovery which appeared in the prestigious Leipzig-based ethnological magazine *Globus* in April 1907. According to local folklore the customs of the association, whose masks were most grotesque and “primitive”, were part of a tradition which went back to prehistoric times. Young men who wanted to join the robber band, which dwelt in a hideout deep in a primordial forest in the mountains, had to prove themselves by jumping across a mountain stream while shouldering a heavy bag of loot. Hence the name “Well-Schooled Thieves”. Each springtime they launched daring raids on the villages in the valley below, terrorising women and children. Rütimeyer interpreted the customs of the fraternity with reference to the theories of three comparative ethnologists, two of them Germans and one an Englishman. The most important of these was the theory of fraternities and male age cohorts as elementary social forms outlined by Heinrich Schurtz (1863–1903) in his *Urgeschichte der Kultur* (1900) and comprehensively developed in *Altersklassen und Männerbünde* (1902), the first global study of “primitive” men’s associations. Rütimeyer also utilised Adolf Bastian’s practice of drawing ethnographic parallels and Edward Burnet Tylor’s idea of archaic cultural layers. Applying a combination of these theories, Rütimeyer concluded that the fraternity which he had discovered was a primitive men’s ■ 139

secret society very similar to those described by Schurtz which had been encountered in Melanesia and West Africa. Such “Männerbünde” often dwelt in secluded “men’s houses” in the forest. Entrants were accepted only after undergoing elaborate initiation tests designed to prove their physical prowess and fitness to join. These often involved the “right to steal” and to terrorise the local populace, particularly women and children. All these features were present in the Swiss lads’ association discovered by Rüttimeyer.

The article concludes by briefly considering the wider significance of Rüttimeyer’s contribution as an one example among many of a growing interest in Schurtz’s theory of the “Männerbund” and its application to a broad range of academic disciplines, a development which was followed after 1918 by the utilisation of the theory by right-wing radicals in Germany and culminated after 1933 in a number of acrimonious political controversies within the Nazi Party over the relationship between male bonding and race, homosexuality and women in the Third Reich.