

A popular Swiss custom : 13 January : Urnascher Silvester Chlause

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Urnascher Silvester Chlause

There are still a few regions of Switzerland that look much as they did in Heidi's day. Rolling hills, fine woods, cows on the pastures, cosy farmhouses and a splendid frieze of mountains in the background are the components of the landscape. And in winter, when the cows are in the barns, a deep mantle of snow lies over it all. The nadir of the year is at hand, the season's last jobs have been done, thoughts begin to turn to the year to come. Whereas today these white surroundings conjure up thoughts of the pleasures of skiing, the utter silence and the spell of the cold white expanses formerly seemed to hold a secret menace. In the long winter nights in lonely farmsteads it was easy for the inhabitants to think of the darkness as a cloak for the misdeeds of evil spirits.

And because inactivity demoralizes, it was easier to take arms against a sea of fears. Both the old heathen beliefs and the Christian creed offered forms of self-defence, and the two were combined over the centuries to yield rituals which would frighten off fiends and win the favour of good spirits for the coming year. While the origins of these rituals are still in many respects obscure and their archaic practices have lost all serious purpose today, they have survived as customs in many places particularly in the depths of the country.

Among the most spectacular Alpine winter customs that have survived into our own times — and are now even gaining in splendour from year to year—are the masked revels that take place in the valley of Urnasch, in the Protestant part of the Canton of Appenzell. Although they really constitute a New Year's Eve custom, they are celebrated on 13 January, reminding us that the local populace once refused to accept the Gregorian calendar when it was adopted by their Catholic neighbours. The people of Urnasch have remained true, at least in their customs, to the earlier Julian calendar, in which the year begins only on St. Hilary's day.

Masks of many kinds are worn by the figures that go dancing, singing and noisily roistering from house to house and from place to place in the whole valley, but they can be divided into two basic categories: the "ugly" and the "beautiful" masks. Their wearers are known as "Chlause", which derives from the name Nikolaus (Nicholas) and is thus the same word as we find in Santa Claus (St. Nicholas). The "ugly Clauses" are fantastic figures clothed in straw, pine twigs, leaves, wood shavings, moss, ivy, nuts and other materials supplied by nature. Their uncannily expressive get-ups reveal their kinship to the "wild men" of folklore. They are obviously meant, by their fear-in-spring appearance, to drive off evil spirits.

Diametrically opposed to them are the "beautiful Clauses", again in reality young men, but disguised as women with big bells hanging

around them, instruments of noise and symbols of fertility rolled into one. Their most spectacular feature, however, is their headdress. Above masks in the likeness of friendly but vacant girls' faces rise gigantic structures, miniature stages upon which lovingly carved and turned figurines enact scenes from the countryman's daily round, cheese-making or the ascent of the herds to the Alpine pastures. These are reminders of the past year, but they are also wishful thinking—a hope that deep winter will soon relax its grip, and that summer will return to the earth.

The ugly and the beautiful go drifting or galumphing around in groups of six, vying with each other in their decorative display, singing and playing pranks. The New Year's revels in Urnasch have already ceased to be merely a local event, they draw visitors from near and far who think their performance worth a winter journey. And those who come are repaid by a unique spectacle that seems to be resurrected each year out of the remote and mysterious past.

--Niklaus Wyss

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