

## **The Old New Year's Eve – a Rural Swiss Yodeling Custom**

In the Appenzell Outer Rhodes – a remote eastern corner of Switzerland – still exists an impressive New Year's Eve ritual, the so-called «Silvester-Chlause». Groups of men in costumes, with large cow and sleigh bells strapped to their bodies – so called «Kläuse» – acclaim the New Year by making a terrible noise with the bells and singing melancholic yodels.

I'd like to give you an impression of this unique rite with video examples and some explanations of the costumes and the singing style.

Appenzell Outer Rhodes is a small, mountainous Canton in the Eastern part of Switzerland. Agriculture is still the most important part of the economy there. The «Silvester-Chlause» mainly takes place around a small village named Urnäsch.

We assume that this custom has originally been a Christmassy ritual, which has been rescheduled to New Year's Eve because of its pagan character that was not proper for Christmas time – but in fact, we don't know exactly. We can trace back this custom to the 15<sup>th</sup> century but all we know exactly is that the church tried to stop it in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. In the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century it was kind of mendicancy custom of the poor.

The «Silvester-Chlause» takes place on the 13<sup>th</sup> of January, the so-called «old» New Year's Eve. The protestant population of Appenzell Outer Rhodes refused to accept the Gregorian calendar until the end of the 19th century although it was common practice in Switzerland since centuries – because Pope Gregor was a catholic as a matter of course, which has never been a problem for the other protestant Swiss cantons. People from Appenzell are famous for their stubbornness. Therefore, they celebrate until now the “old” Julian New Year's Eve, which is on the 13th of January.

### *Video 4*

In the dawn of the 13<sup>th</sup>, men in costumes start in groups from 5 to 8 people visiting the scattered farms around Urnäsch. They come to the farmhouse and attract attention to themselves by shaking the bells of their costumes. When the farmer comes out of the house or the barn, they form a circle and start yodeling. Then they ring their bells again. The farmer

offers wine to them. If it is a warm morning – that means around 0 degrees – it's white wine, if it's cold – it can be up to minus 18 degrees – they drink warm red wine with spices. Because they wear masks, they cannot drink from a glass, so the farmers offer them the drinks with a drinking straw.

After the third yodel they ring their bells again, shake the farmer's and his family's hands, wish them a good New Year and run away. The farmer gives some money to the leader of the group, who leaves last. You have to watch closely to see when he gives the money. As everywhere in Switzerland money matters are covert.

During the morning, the groups come closer and closer to the village of Urnäsch. They reach the village towards noon. Then they rest for about two hours and afterwards they start again visiting the taverns, bars and restaurants and all the numerous temporarily established pubs in gyms, garages and barns that are crowded with indigenous people and tourists. Here they sing again their yodels for free drinks and money and go on singing (and drinking) until midnight, when the New Year begins.

The singing style is absolutely unique, very typical for the region of Appenzell, but very different from other Swiss yodeling traditions. People of Appenzell don't call this kind of singing "yodeling" but "zäuerle". It is a kind of improvised polyphonic chant without words, a yodeling style with the typical change between chest voice and falsetto.

The one who starts singing the melody is the leader. A second singer follows him in thirds and sixths. The rest of the group accompanies in improvised simple harmonies – tonic and dominant. They call this accompaniment technique «Gradhäbe», which means literally "holding straight". Because of the masks, the voices are damped, which gives them a special timbre. Together with the low pitch and the very slow tempo it makes them sound strange and melancholic.

There are three different types of costumes in this ritual that I want to show you now:

## 1 «Die Schöne»

### *Video 1*

The so called "Beautifuls" wear painted wooden masks, satin clothes and impressive big hats that show scenes from rural life with carved figures on the top. They are decorated with thousands of glass beads and mirrors. Some of the hats are even illuminated with batteries and small light bulbs. Building such a costume takes hundreds of hours of work. That's why the Beautifuls are the highest estimated types of costumes. Often the Beautifuls are the best singers as well.

A group of Beautifuls consists of two women with sleigh bells and big edgewise hats and four men characters with cowbells and flat square hats, which are both played by men. Women are not allowed to participate in that custom as actors. Men say that it is too exhausting for women. That may be, the bells weigh 20 to 30 kilos and a group walks 10 to 20 kilometres on this day (while one drinks plenty of alcohol). In fact it is very exhausting but it's also typical for this region to bar women from public life. Woman suffrage for example was introduced in Appenzell Outer-Rhodes 16 years ago in 1989. Unbelievable for the oldest democracy in Europe, but this shows, how strong traditions are in this region...

## 2 «Die Wüeschte»

### *Video 2*

The second type, the “uglys” wear scary masks of paper-mâché, wool or wood, teeth and bones from cows or pigs, cow horns and other natural materials. Clothes are made of hay, straw or brushwood of spruce fir, pine, holly bush or ivy. The Uglys are often younger men that are not so experienced singers (Or “Beautifuls” when the weather is very bad. Rain, snow or strong wind would destroy the beautiful costumes, so most of them have an “ugly” surrogate costume.) But it is really difficult singing outside under the masks. They can hardly hear anything from the others.

You can also recognise the age of the men by their shoes: the typical shoes are the old Swiss army boots that were in use until 1991. So everyone that wears this type of shoes is at least 34 now. Of course one could buy these shoes but the problem is that you suffer agonies for the first 500 kilometres. And you need a pair of convenient shoes to survive this morning.

## «Die Schöö-Wüeschte»

### *Video 3*

The third type of costumes are in use since the 1960ies and are nowadays the most widespread: The «Beautiful-Uglys». It's a combination of the first two types. The costumes are made from natural materials like the Uglys but the costumes are in the aesthetics of the Beautifuls. The masks are mostly made of scales of fir cones.

I hope that I could give you with these video examples an impression of this unique rural Swiss yodeling custom.