

Shrovetide and Carnival - Mummery or Basic Need?



Professor Dr. Mezger was interviewed by Horst Buchmann

Professor Dr Werner Mezger became a professor in 1989 with a paper on the idea of the fool and on carnival customs. Since 1996, Mezger has been Professor of Folklore in Freiburg im Breisgau and Director of the Institute for Folklore of the Germans of Eastern Europe there.

What is characteristic of the Swabian-Alemannic 'fooling' places? Is the basic tenor the same or are there major differences?

The basic tenor is certainly the same. The people in the Swabian-Alemannic area don't want to get drunk. They want to have fun, but they also want to convey joy. They have a sense of cohesion beyond the carnival days and get involved all year round. For example, now in aid campaigns for Ukraine. There is a very strong sense of community everywhere. But nowadays it is also the experience of a certain timelessness. The time factor plays an important role. For us, time is very much out of joint. It has lost its rhythm. We turn night into day, go glacier skiing in summer and to the Caribbean in winter. Even the week no longer has a rhythm. Shrovetide, on the other hand, is a fixed point in the year. We live for it when it is approaching. We live from it when it is over.

What distinguishes the Swabian-Alemannic Fasnet from Carnival?

In Cologne there was almost the same masquerade as in the south until the French Revolution. Everywhere the earliest masks were of devilish figures, only later did the costumes become freer. In the Enlightenment and due to the Napoleonic changes in the world, celebrations finally collapsed. Later, under the Prussians, the people of Cologne made cautious attempts at revival by introducing themed parades with a romanticizing character. The "Hero Carnival" made his way into the city and was married to Princess Venezia.

In the middle of the 19th century, specifically around 1848, people became aware for the first time of social upheavals in Shrovetide and Carnival: the common people could not take part in the elegant balls at all. They felt like mere extras in the parades, which were designed by the haute volée.

This was the same in the Rhineland as in the Alemannic region. In Rottweil, too, the common people felt patronised by the upper echelons during carnival, because only their ideas were allowed to be implemented in themed parades. This finally led in 1870 to the Rottweil

craftsmen simply getting their old 'fool's' costumes out of the cupboards and chests again. This regression to the former *Mummenschanz* did not happen in Cologne. But in order to bring the different social classes together at carnival, the people of Cologne discovered singing. To this day, nowhere is there more carnival singing than in Cologne.

Where does the basic need to celebrate Shrovetide actually come from?

At first, Shrovetide was an economic custom. At the beginning of Lent, people stopped eating certain foods; no meat or dairy products. The slaughter of large livestock could be stopped, that was no problem. Chickens ended up in the soup pots of the nobility. The remaining flock still laid eggs. When celebrating Shrovetide, other things were added. There was singing, dancing, theatre. Until the 15th century, the church had not been critical of Shrovetide. The theologians granted people a kind of outlet before Lent, before they entered the period of abstinence. In analogy to Augustine, they later equated Shrovetide with the devil's state and Lent with God's state. Therefore the earliest known carnival masks were devils.

What does Fasnet do to someone who takes part in the parade?

Every year, as an active jester, you ask yourself why you do it. For example, you walk down through the town of Rottweil in your costume and mask and people look at you like you were a prize-winning cow. Only very gradually do you realise that they don't even recognise you and that you are a mystery to them. This opens up completely new social possibilities. As a jester, you can address with a familiar "you" unmasked people with whom you have no contact at all in normal life. You can, for example, engage local celebrities in funny conversations and "recite" to them, i.e. rub their noses in the foolishness they have indulged in during the year. Behind the mask, you are someone else. In a way, you can participate in your everyday world from a completely new perspective.

Can interested people from Bulgaria or Romania really understand this kind of carnival?

Indeed they can! Especially the southern German masks and disguises are anything but foreign to Romanian and Bulgarian spectators. With the so-called "Kukeri" and "Survakari", Bulgaria has an enormous wealth of carnival masks. In Romania, or more precisely in Transylvania, there is even a carnival tradition that looks deceptively similar to Swabian-Alemannic customs. These are the so-called "Urzeln" from Agneteln (Agnita in Romanian), whose black Fleckles robes and fox tails look like the "Häs" of the Überlingen "Hänsele".

Many inhabitants of Agneteln who fled or were driven out came to southern Germany after the war. Quite a few even brought their original robes with them, an impressive testimony to their love of their homeland. And in Großsachsenheim near Ludwigsburg, they have ever since continued to cultivate the custom of their old home town.

Carnival figures like those in south-west Germany can be found in twenty European countries. They stretch from Spain to the Black Sea, from Sicily to England. And when you meet them - in whatever carnival town - they have something like an air of eternity about them: The masks always stay young, only the wearers underneath get old. When a jester's dress is inherited and passed on to the next generation the deceased lives on in his or her former mask and the accompanying "Häs".

Seen in this light, Shrovetide is not only fun or amusement, but can also be very thought-provoking and go straight to the heart.