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The intangible heritage of Carnival in the Köln region of Germany

Introduction

Carnivals have taken place in the Rhineland region of Germany for centuries, and the biggest and most influential of these to have survived as a contemporary festival is in the city of Cologne (Köln), a Lenten festival, which takes place on Rosenmontag (Rose Monday), two days before Ash Wednesday. However, smaller, local Carnivals are also enthusiastically celebrated in the smaller towns in the region, as I witnessed in March 2019. Carnivals in this region are closely linked to the calendar of the Catholic Church and the lead up to the observance of Lent. The Köln region Carnivals are also known as Fastelovend, which means Carnival in the local Cologne dialect, Kölsch. The Carnivals and the celebrations which take place, although conforming in many ways to the traditional analysis of Carnival developed by Mikhail Bakhtin, are also opportunities to reinforce, preserve and transmit the intangible cultural heritage, of this part of Germany.

Bakhtin and Carnival theory in the Köln region

The Cologne region Carnivals retain many elements of Rabelais’ Medieval descriptions of folk Carnival in his novels *Gargantua and Pantagruel* (1532:1534:2006), such as excessive eating, drinking and revelry. Bakhtin later used these descriptions in his literary criticism *Rabelais and His World* (1965) and they form his theory of Carnival and the Carnivalesque. Indeed, the Carnivals that I participated in and observed in Bergisch-Gladbach and Bensberg certainly manifested many elements of Bakhtin’s theory. The Carnival is acknowledged as a very special and separate time, which begins at 11:11 am precisely and ends at midnight on Shrove Tuesday, with the final act of Carnival with the burning of the Carnival dolls and eating of fish on Aschermittwoch (Ash Wednesday), which absolves worshippers of all the sins committed during the Carnival time. Bakhtin discusses these traditional dolls in *Rabelais and His World* (1965) when discussing the Carnivalesque social inversion of the role of the King. Bakhtin writes that the King is chosen and mocked by the whole community, and receives abuse and beatings when his reign (and Carnival) are over

just as the carnival [sic] dummy of winter or of the dying year

is mocked, beaten, torn to pieces burned or drowned even

in our time (Bakhtin, 1965, p197)

The Carnivalesque, can also be seen in the behaviour of the communities in Bergisch-Gladbach and Bensberg, who work are given the Thursday, Saturday and Sunday off from work to attend Carnival parties and parades, drank and danced at parties very late every night during Carnival. Carnival leaders dressed as traditional clowns (Lappenclown), whilst the activity of dressing up in costume for Carnival, is encouraged.

Unlike Caribbean Carnival, Bakhtin’s theory of Carnival and the Carnivalesque do seem relevant to many aspects contemporary Carnival in the Cologne region, and in particular as I observed in Bergisch-Gladbach and Bensberg.

The historical background to Carnivals in the Köln region

In its history, Cologne is highly likely have had the pagan feasts of Dionysus and Saturnalia, and the Teutons Winter Solstice banishment of winter demons. Bakhtin writes

Even in the cities where the process of development acquired a

more or less classic character (as in Rome, Paris, Nuremberg, and Cologne),

local festivities formed the basis of carnival [sic]. (Bakhtin, 1965, p 219).

However, the current Carnival traditions of the Dreigestirn and their Guilds date from the 1820s. (KölnTourismus ServiceCenter, March 2019). The Dreigestirn are three characters who rule Carnival. These are the Prinz, The Jungfrau (Virgin) and Bauer (Farmer). Traditionally in Cologne, the Jungfrau is a man who transvestisises for his Carnival reign, but in Bergisch-Gladbach and Bensberg the character is played as a woman. There is also a Kinderdreigestirn, a group of children who mirror the activities of the Dreigestirn proper.

Intangible cultural heritage in Bergisch-Gladbach and Bensberg

Carnival as I observed it in the towns of Bergisch-Gladbach and Bensberg were festivals where the intangible cultural heritage of the region is celebrated and practised each year. However it is also clear that the festival has evolved. It meets contemporary standards and expectations of fun and safety (electronic music played by DJs at Carnival parties, normal smoking restrictions, not drinking and driving).

On parade with the Printzengarde

The Carnival organisers are part of a number of groups or Guilds, and these groups take it in turns to provide the individuals to play the Dreigestirn characters during Carnival. This year, in 2019, they came from the Grosse Bensberger group, and Prince Hanno, Jungfrau Jutta and Bauer Manfred were selected. During my stay I was honoured to be attached to the Prinzengarde as one of our hosts, Martin Hardenacke, was a leading member of the group. This group accompanies the Dreigestirn at all times during Carnival, even on stage, taking part in the performances. The Dreigestirn are important character in Köln region Carnival celebrations. However, these prominent roles are not examples of Carnivalesque social inversion, but the public recognition of leading members of the local community and successful businessman, as the associated expenses of being a member of the Dreigestirn are high and need to be met by the members themselves. The Dreigestirn are feted everywhere they go, and treated with respect and immense affection. In return, they deliver well-rehearsed musical performances of specially composed songs to popular and well known tunes. The appearance of the Dreigestirn signifies that it is Carnival time and that this event or parade is an important part of this. This is also accompanied by the giving and receiving of medals, which is a great honour.

Other Carnival signs which I identified are the reinforcement of the local shared identity through speaking and singing in the regional German dialect of Kölsch. This is a unifying activity for the community which elevates the dialect above the official language, German. In addition, the beer drunk in great quantities during Carnival is also called Kölsch, and special glasses are also used during this time. In the days leading to Carnival, people dress up and many people wear specific costumes which are red, or red and white in colour, which are the regional (and football team) colours, the traditional ragged Lappenclown clown costumes (or modern Western clown costumes). However, on Carnival days a greater level of individualism is expressed, with people wearing a variety of costumes. ‘So here we see fantasy. I have a boring job but I would really like to be a pilot, so here I am a pilot’ (Werner, Bensberg Bank, 2019). The most insistent sign of intangible heritage, however, was the Carnival music, which was everywhere; on the radio, in bars and shops and of course in the parades. This infectious Carnival pop music is produced by local bands, sung by everyone and danced to at Carnival parties. However, this music is not played after Carnival at all, and new music is composed for the next Carnival. This element of Köln intangible heritage is close to the musical traditions of the Caribbean, and in particular the music produced by the Soca and Calypso monarchs which is played all throughout Carnival each year. The culmination of Carnival are the parades, where floats pass through the town, accompanied by groups in costume parading on the road. As the floats and groups pass by, vast amounts of sweets and flowers are thrown to the crowds, who shout ‘camella’ to be thrown sweets, and ‘strussje’ to thrown flowers. The huge amount of sweets and flowers given to the crowds is part of Carnival bounty and excess shared by the community. All of these activities described here show that the intangible cultural heritage of these towns is being preserved and transmitted in these Carnival traditions.

Diversity and tradition

However, is it possible for this intangible heritage to survive if other cultural influences are introduced? Despite the exuberance of these Carnival experiences, the issue of diversity and the role of the multicultural communities of Bergisch-Gladbach in these celebrations remains, particularly as there are people of third generation Turkish descent. Although people of colour were part of the audiences in the parades, there were none in the parade except Anne Marie Williams from Rampage Mas Band, and myself, and the only other Carnival cultural tradition which was seen was a Samba band from Switzerland.

Diversity was only briefly touched upon during the observation of Carnival, and more research and information are needed before any real analysis of this can take place; for example how do the towns celebrate Eid, or Diwali, and do these occasions attract the same level of universal support? This idea of separation versus multiculturalism goes to the heart of the fight for identity which is fuelling current European politics and debate. Further enquiry is needed to examine whether intangible cultural heritage thrives or diminishes in multicultural societies.

Conclusion

Köln Carnival demonstrates how intangible cultural heritage is preserved and transmitted through European Carnival as well as Caribbean Mas. However, unlike Caribbean Mas, Bakhtin’s Carnival theories seem more relevant to this European form of Carnival. Carnival has been instrumental in the preservation and transmission of this current form of intangible cultural heritage in Bergisch-Gladbach, Bensberg and the Köln region for almost two hundred years.

Long may songs play and the Kölsch flow!

Bibliography

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3. **March 5th 2019** [**https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l6QCZ7x0hVE**](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l6QCZ7x0hVE)**, Behind the Scenes at Cologne Carnival**