

VORWEIHNACHTZEIT / PRE-CHRISTMAS SEASON

der Aberglaube, die Aberglauben: superstition
der Glaube, die Glauben: belief

BELIEF: conviction that certain things are true, usually at a particular holiday or an isolated period of time (Glaube)

SUPERSTITION: any belief or attitude that is inconsistent with the known laws of science or with what is generally considered in the particular society as true or rational; especially such a belief in charms, omens, supernatural, etc. and can happen any time (Aberglaube)

Superstitious Traditions

With the development in modern society of new forms of the Christmas celebration, the older, pre-industrial forms of the celebration receded into the background. This applies, for example, to the numerous superstitious traditions connected with Christmas. People thought that they had to protect themselves from various sorts of spirits, or that from various omens they could divine the future. Modern life has made the old magical practices meaningless – magical practices like sacrificing food in order to promote the well-being of the animals and plants important to the agricultural economy, or the proclaiming of Christ's birth to the animals in the stable.

The Role of Superstitions

Superstitions of this kind usually appear when man fails to understand the objective conditions determining the course of natural and social events. He uses superstitious practices to ward off those powers which he cannot influence with rational action based on practical experience. The more man comes to know about the laws governing nature and society, the less he will have to take recourse to these traditional forms of superstition. What remain are residues, hardly admitted to but still there, like the fear of the number 13, etc. These, however, are probably no more or less numerous in Germany than they are in other modern societies.

TERRIFYING TRADITIONS: GHASTLY WINTER DEMONS RUN WILD IN ALPS

Halloween spooks are for wimps compared to the grisly Christmastime traditions of Europe's Alps, where demonic creatures come out to punish naughty children or to drive winter away each year. A gorgeous new photography book explores the many guises of these wild monsters, whose traditional rumpus harkens back to pagan rites.

With its bright-red eyes, green cheeks, oddly crooked nose and rows of white teeth, the monster carved out of wood looks like it should be on a Native American totem pole or a mask from Papua New Guinea. But the blonde Heidi-style braids attached to the mask made of Swiss pine betray a different origin. The image of the mask wasn't captured in an exotic, far-off place, but the picturesque Swiss valley of Lötschental.

"When you discover something like this practically at your doorstep, it is fantastic," says photographer Carsten Peter. "I travel a lot, and that sharpens the sense for such things."

Peter's photography book, "*Alpendämonen*," or "Demons of the Alps," explores 20 different such wintertime traditions from the Alps that include gruesome masks, costumed processions and pagan rites. The at times terrifying figures often go by different names, but are most commonly known as *Krampus* or *Perchten*, who serve as helpers to Saint Nicholas. They threaten to punish or even kidnap naughty children when he visits on the evening of Dec. 5, ahead of the Feast of St. Nicholas the following day.