

Fasching und Karneval: Grüße und Narrenrufe (greetings and fool shouts)

der Brauch, die Bräuche: custom
 das Gruß, die Grüße: greeting
 der Ausdruck, die Ausdrücke: expression, saying
 der Narrenruf, die Narrenrufe: shouts, screams, calls from a fool

“Kölle Alaaf!”

(typical call or shout by the people of Cologne during the Carnival season, which means “Here’s to Cologne!”, a declaration of love for the city)

It’s Carnival season in Germany! In Cologne, costumed Germans marched through the streets this week, shouting the word Alaaf as they excitedly greeted one another. In Mainz and Düsseldorf, the word Helau echoed through the city as the Carnival season kicked off on November 11 at 11:11 a.m.

Both of these words are Carnival salutations, used by Germans to greet one another during the festivities of the so-called “fifth season.” But do you know what they mean?

Before you start shouting Alaaf or Helau, you must be mindful of where you are. Different regions use different salutations, and using the wrong one could serve as an embarrassment.

To understand the meaning of these two words, let’s first take a look at Carnival’s origins:

Carnival season takes place in the months before Lent – a religious holiday during which Catholics give up some of their luxuries, such as rich foods and drink. Historically, Catholics often had to dispose of these luxuries when Lent crept up on them. So to avoid being wasteful, religious communities held giant parties beforehand, which gradually evolved into today’s Carnival season.

Today, residents of the Rhineland use the word Alaaf as their Carnival salutation. This word originated in Cologne and comes from all af or alles ab/weg. In English, this means “everything gone” – thereby referring to the clearance of “luxury” items often found at parties. Additionally, Cologne residents will often include the name of their city (in their own dialect) before the salutation: Kölle Alaaf!



Carnival participants pose for a photo in front of the Cologne Cathedral.



In Cologne, residents use the word "Alaaf" to greet each other during Carnival season.