

## Fasching und Karneval: Gesellschaften (societies)

die Gesellschaft, die Gesellschaften: society, club  
die Sitzung, die Sitzungen: meeting to plan Carnival activities

1. In January and February, the many carnival societies hold dozens of meetings with plenty of drinking, singing, laughing, dancing, and Schunkeln (swaying arm-in-arm).
2. Folk characters appear and sing their songs in the local dialect.

Throughout the Karneval season, there are various costume balls, private parties, black tie affairs and booze fests, all known as *Sitzungen* (sessions), generally geared to raising money for floats and parades that take place during the week leading up to Ash Wednesday. Although similar, Karneval isn't the same everywhere.

Modern carnival there began in 1823 with the founding of a Carnival Club in Cologne. Most cities and villages of the Rhineland have their own individual carnival traditions. Nationally famous are the carnival in Cologne (Köln), Düsseldorf and Mainz.

There is great method and planning to this carnival madness. In all three major cities, and in countless smaller communities, industrious citizens gather together in special societies or guilds and spend months organizing the Karneval events. These date all the way back to pre-Christian times and were originally designed to exorcise evil spirits. Later, the Catholic church considered the festivities a healthy way of getting rid of excess energy before Lent, and the customs prevailed. The societies hold *Sitzungen* (literally, meetings), at which no conventional business but much drinking, prescribed foolery and merriment dominate the agenda. In the more famous Sitzungen, notably the televised ones in Mainz, national figures have no compunction about dressing up and making clowns of themselves.

After the official opening in the fall, there is another highlight to celebrate at the turn of the year – but this usually only concerns members of Karneval, Fasching or Fastnacht associations. Carnival for all – this consists of the “three wild days”, which should not really be so called: in the Rhineland, and to an increasing extent elsewhere too, celebrations go on from Maundy Thursday named Weiberfastnacht, right on through a turbulent weekend up until Shrove Tuesday. This is followed by Ash Wednesday, on which everything is officially over – but which in reality forms part of the festivities in the form of organized, traditional meals of fish.

In the Rhineland, the culmination of the carnival around *Rosenmontag* is considered to be the “fifth season of the year”. Clubs organize “sessions” which are show events called *Sitzung* with club members or invited guests performing dance, comedy and songs in costumes. The most frequently performed piece of music during such “sessions” is the “Narrhallamarsch”. The committee that organizes the events in each town consists of a president and 10 junior members and is called the “Council of Eleven” or “Elferrat.” The number eleven, “elf” in German, is significant in Carneval celebrations because <sup>[citation needed]</sup> it is an acronym for the French Revolution values of “égalité, liberté, fraternité.”