

[straitstimes.com](https://www.straitstimes.com)

Swiss village set to vote to keep cowbells ringing

4–5 Minuten

AARWANGEN, Switzerland - Cows grazing on lush pastures with ornate metal bells gently tinkling around their necks may be one of the ultimate symbols of Switzerland, but not everyone is enchanted by such traditional scenes.

In the village of Aarwangen in central Switzerland, [a complaint was filed earlier in 2023](#) over the noise levels from a herd of around 15 cows grazing overnight on a field next to a residential area.

Two couples in rental apartments overlooking the field asked the authorities to intervene and ensure the farmer removed the bells at night.

The reaction was swift and fierce, with overwhelming demands for a local vote to protect the traditional use of bells.

“My first reaction when I heard about the complaint was one of surprise,” Aarwangen mayor Niklaus Lundsgaard-Hansen, who lives near the field in question, told AFP.

“I wasn’t aware that cows made a lot of noise, but I have learnt that they can disturb some people.”

He was even more surprised at the massive response.

Petitioners only needed to gather backing from 10 per cent of

those eligible to vote in the village of 4,800 people – about 380 signatures – to push the issue to a vote under Switzerland’s famous direct democracy system.

Instead, they showed up with 1,099 signatures for their “Bell Initiative”, aimed at maintaining the right of farmers to use cowbells at all hours.

“That’s enormous,” Mr Lundsgaard-Hansen said.

The initiative will be officially presented before village voters at a municipal assembly on Dec 11, with the popular vote expected to take place in June 2024.

‘About tradition’

Cowbells were once seen as indispensable for keeping track of herds grazing on Alpine pastures, and while their usefulness has waned with the emergence of Global Positioning System trackers, they remain a powerful symbol of idyllic Swiss rural life.

Last week, rituals related to Alpine farming, including driving cattle up to high mountain pastures for the summer wearing the decorative bells, were added to Unesco’s Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity list.

But with many urbanites seeking peace and tranquillity in the countryside, within a commuter distance from cities and towns, the charm of cowbells sometimes wears thin.

A growing number of complaints has been lodged in recent years over noise levels from cowbells.

There have also been protests about churches ringing out the time every 15 minutes, night and day, as is typical in many Swiss communities – something the Bell Initiative also aims to defend.

Such complaints frequently spark heated reactions in defence of traditions feared under attack in Switzerland – a country of high immigration where foreigners make up a quarter of the population.

“It’s about our tradition,” neurologist Andreas Baumann, who is behind the initiative, told AFP.

“Do we want to preserve what our ancestors created, or do we just put that into a museum?” he asked.

“The bells are in the DNA of Swiss people, and here in Aarwangen we want to preserve that.”

Set on the banks of the Aare river against a backdrop of snow-covered mountains, Aarwangen still counts 19 working farms, according to Mr Lundsgaard-Hansen.

But the village, strategically located half an hour’s drive from Bern, and about an hour to both Zurich and Basel, “is not really a farming community”, he said.

‘Gives me hope’

The couples who filed the complaints about the cowbells likely had not expected such an overwhelming pushback.

One decided to withdraw their complaint, while the other is looking to move out of the village, the mayor said.

Regardless of which way the village votes, the farmer in question could still be ordered to remove the cowbells at night if the authorities find they surpass acceptable noise levels.

A judicial ruling is expected soon.

Mr Rolf Rohrbach, who runs a nearby cattle farm, said he loved the tradition.

“It gives me hope,” he told AFP, also insisting he needs bells to keep track of young cows.

Personally, he said he could think of nothing better than to hear the gentle ringing at night.

“When I sleep, I like it,” he said. “I know my cows are home.”

AFP