

He Can Have his Cake and We Will Eat It Too

The Role of the Groom's Cake in Southeastern Louisiana Wedding Receptions

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While a small group of folklorists, anthropologists and cultural historians have explored the place of the wedding cake in cultural history (see: Jeaffreson 1873:200-209, Baker 1974:41-43, Douglas 1991:249-275, Charsley 1987, 1988, 1992, Seligson 1973:97-102, Woloson 2002:155-186), fewer have focused on the role of the groom's cake. Among those who have, some such as English folklorist Margaret Baker, regard it as a thing of the past. According to Baker, "the separate groom's cake was commonly seen in America until about thirty years ago and, pre-cut by the caterer, was packed in white satin, initialed heart-shaped boxes and carried home by guests as 'dreaming bread'" (1977:111). Claims of the groom's cake demise are premature, however. The tradition is not only alive but flourishing in the southern part of the United States as I discovered as part of my investigation of Louisiana plantation weddings. I attended over fifty weddings and receptions in southeastern Louisiana between 2009 and 2012 and from venues in the large urban areas of New Orleans and Baton Rouge to sites in small rural towns that follow the undulating turns of the Mississippi River, the majority of the wedding receptions of racially and economically diverse Louisiana brides and grooms shared one significant, constant feature: the presence of a small chocolate groom's cake displayed alongside an imposing wedding cake at the culmination of a highly structured, ritualized wedding meal.

Almost all of the wedding receptions I attended highlighted these two distinct types of cake. The small chocolate theme-based cake or "groom's cake" was served alongside the "wedding cake" or what was once termed the "bride's cake" - a multi-tiered stacked cake decorated in a light frosting with pastel-colored flowers or a more modern type of flowing fondant frosting. Just flipping through the pages of bridal magazines now available on newsstands reveals recent wedding cake trends toward elaborately artistic, exotic colors and inventive, imaginative details.ⁱ Such contemporary publications indicate the influence of visual media on a bride's choice of cake design. The ultimate goal for many brides is to consciously mirror and deliberately incorporate details inspired from the lace, beading or patterns from their wedding gown into the cake design. This supports Wendy A. Woloson's claim that a visual and symbolic relationship established between the wedding cake and the bride in previous centuries continues today (2002:175).

Building on Woloson's argument, serving two cakes at a wedding, one for the bride and one for the groom, not only suggests social and familial relationships but also conveys subtle messages about gendered roles in American society. I contend that celebratory cakes communicate important messages about gender, economic and social status, especially when considered in connection with the ritual aspects of a wedding feast. Since the Victorian period in the United States, the trend has been for the American bride's cake to lighten and whiten and the groom's cake to be omitted from the wedding feast, with the exception, as I point out, of the American South. There, in contrast to the ornately

decorated muted tones of the wedding cake, the conventionally smaller and darker theme-based groom's cake is clearly a performance of southern masculine identity in the overtly feminized space of the wedding. Unlike the wedding cake that conceals or only hints of the bride's personality under layers of swathed frosting, the southern groom's cake openly affirms individual masculine characteristics and male personality in the otherwise controlled space of wedding ritual.

The groom's cake on display in southeastern Louisiana wedding receptions is a signifier of juxtaposed gendered roles celebrated in the heteronormative expression of the traditional white wedding. The groom's masculine attributes and interests are reflected from the bride's feminized perspective as she is the one who typically chooses the groom's cake. Thus, the presence of two cakes at southern wedding receptions forms a distinctive foodways that suggests a form of encoded commentary on southern constructions of feminine and masculine gendered roles. When chosen by the bride, the groom's cake may reflect and/or celebrate the groom's successful performance of hegemonic masculinity or underscore notions of the groom's virility by playfully critiquing aspects of his masculinity. In this paper, I begin by placing the presence of cake at weddings within a historical context. I then proceed to an analysis of ethnographic data derived from my investigation of southeastern Louisiana wedding receptions where the presence of a groom's cake is part of a long southern tradition based on customs derived from English practices. And, lastly, I describe the literary origins of a regional oikotype currently reflected in the armadillo groom's cake that commonly appears in southeastern Louisiana wedding receptions.

Cake as a Code of Social Relations

As Simon Charsley observes, the paradoxical presence of any cake at a wedding "makes sense to all involved with it; yet whether it has meaning of any kind is commonly doubted" (1992:5). For anthropologists, as Charsley notes, the wedding cake is problematic because it "tests the boundaries of 'food.'" He argues that celebratory cake may "be regarded as a food, yet it is not consumed for its nutritional value nor even, often, for the pleasure of its eating. It is expensive, but not a luxury." Celebratory cakes, high in empty caloric content, offer a modicum of nutritional value through calories derived from raw ingredients that have been heavily refined or chemically reconstituted by heating techniques. Charsley claims that what little evolution there has been in the meaning of the cake has been driven by technical changes in the cake's materiality. Even today, the place of wedding cake in contemporary wedding receptions represents a shared or common significance through highly symbolic and subjective meanings for all involved.

As Rebecca Mead explains, many brides are pressured by the "traditionalesque" and justify their actions on the basis of tradition that reassures them "that [their] choices will be sustained by more than [their] will alone" (2007:66). Popular American bridal magazines commonly contain at least one section dedicated to cake trends in each issue, conveying the cake's centrality to the wedding reception. Perhaps not surprisingly, then, it is my experience that most attendees at American wedding receptions expect a wedding cake. As a result, many brides serve wedding cake, not because they are aware of latent historic or symbolic meaning, but because they wish to fulfill their guests'

expectations. In the south, these expectations extend to a groom's cake. I found that most guests at southern weddings also expect a chocolate groom's cake and their expectations are reinforced by southern bridal magazines that feature cleverly constructed, multi-tiered chocolate groom's cakes alongside ornate wedding cakes.ⁱⁱ

In southeastern Louisiana and throughout other parts of the South, the family's socioeconomic status is showcased through the type of cakes that are displayed along with the manner in which the cakes are presented. For example, economic and class indicators are apparent in the contrast between an elaborate four-tiered fondant-covered cake served on an expensive raised silver cake plate and a two-tiered buttercream frosted cake with colored, piped frosting presented on a disposable cake board made from silver-covered cardboard. The cost differential between these two cakes, that might be well over one thousand dollars, would be recognized by many wedding guests.

When viewed from the various perspectives of anthropological theorists, the wedding reception can be understood not only as a feast of inclusion, or in Van Gennep's terms, a rite of incorporation (Van Gennep 1960), but also as a rite of conspicuous consumption that is in part constructed through food and drink. Alessandro Falassi defines these rites as "prepared in abundance and even excess, made generously available and solemnly consumed in various forms of feasts... an eloquent way to represent and enjoy abundance, fertility, and prosperity" (1987:4). The entire wedding meal, which culminates in the cake itself, may be seen as an indicator of social class and taste and at times, the parents of the bride may assume much of the expense for their daughter's wedding because they feel that the family is on display. As Bourdieu argues, "The style of meal that people like to offer is no doubt a very good indicator of the image they wish to give or avoid giving to others. . ." (1984:79, see also Delamont 1983). Just as in the example above of the two wedding cakes, social and economic images are readily apparent in the price differential between a reception where guests are served a plated dinner and a reception where guests line up for a self-serve buffet. Another example of class indicators may be seen in the food selection; serving filet mignon is more costly than chicken breast. Reading such factors supports structural anthropologist Mary Douglas's argument in that when food "is treated as a code, the message it encodes will be found in the pattern of social relations being expressed. The message is about different degrees of hierarchy, inclusion and exclusion, boundaries and transactions across the boundaries" (1991:253). Although, in this situation, Douglas is writing about food in the private home, her concepts apply to food served in what she terms "a life cycle celebration."

Different types of cake are an integral part of these types of celebrations. Moreover, an array of rules controls not only the selection of the cake(s) to be served but also govern how the cake(s) are cut. Cake cutting at a wedding depends on the inclusion and exclusion of boundaries. The cake cutting ritual creates a visual and sensory perception of social unity not just between the bride and groom but for all of those present at the wedding. According to Charlsley, the cake cutting "makes possible a whole series of events" that begins with photographic opportunities and ends with sections of cake taken home for future celebration not only by the couple but also by certain wedding guests (Charlsley 1992:11-12). Because the cake cutting ritual signals a set of socially imposed power dynamics within

the newly created husband/wife relationship, rigid rules pertaining to the cake are unstated but understood by all present. Only the bride and groom are allowed to initially touch or to cut either of the cakes. The large wedding cake is the first cake to be cut. The cake knife, often a wedding gift marked with the couple's initials or decorated in their wedding colors, is held in the bride's dominant hand with her new husband's hand over hers. As they cut the first slice together, the piece is plated. Then, the couple shares the cake by feeding one another (sometimes smashing) in front of the happy audience of on-looking guests. Following the mutual feeding, the cake is removed or cut in place and served to guests to include them in the symbolic sharing of the cake. In southeastern Louisiana, the groom's cake is cut in a similar manner. For many weddings guests, the cake cutting ritual signals the finale of a long performance by the bride and groom and their families. Pieces of cake may be sent home to guests unable to be present at the wedding or to children too young to attend. In this example, the cake becomes a token of inclusion and functions to expand the community created by the wedding. I have noticed a recent trend that left-over cake is now being taken home with the bride's parents with the ultimate aim of being served at the post-wedding family brunch.

Woloson views the power dynamics expressed in the cake cutting ritual as sexually symbolic when she writes of the Victorian bride:

Because the cake and the bride were as one, what was done to the cake physically was done to the bride metaphorically . . . Since the wedded couple now cut the cake themselves, the act [of cutting through the thick layer of frosting] represented the breaking of the bride's hymen by her husband, the consummation of the marriage, and the larger power dynamic between the wedded couple (2002:177).

In the South today the inclusion of a groom's cake in the cake cutting ritual displaces much of the overt sexual symbolism suggested by Woloson. Because we cannot advocate that the modern groom, in cutting his cake in a manner similar to his bride, is somehow signifying the loss of his virginity, I suggest that we view the two cakes from a more historical perspective.

Historical Origins of the Wedding Cake

The presence of cake as part of wedding ritual is the symbolic equivalent of a much older representation of abundance and fertility. The marriage rite of throwing or inundating the bride and bridegroom with grains, nuts or fruit is, according to Edward Westermarck, "a primitive Indo-European practice extending from India, Indo-China, and the Indian Archipelago in the East to the Atlantic Ocean in the West" (1922:471). This practice of literally showering the couple with wheat, grains of barley, or rice appears cross-culturally and is still a part of wedding practices in the United States although pelting the newlyweds with rice as they exit the church following the ceremony has fallen out of favor.ⁱⁱⁱ The presence of a cake-like ceremonial loaf can be traced to Greco-Roman weddings where the Greek bride and groom shared a sesame seed cake as part of the wedding ritual while a barley loaf was broken over the elite Roman bride's head. In one instance, consuming the seed cake symbolized the marriage and in the other, a loaf was broken over the bride's head. In his description of the numerous modes of marriage practiced in Classical society, Westermarck notes, "The Roman

confarreatio, the patrician form of marriage, needed the presence of the Pontifex Maximus, the Flamen Dialis, and ten other witnesses (1922:436).^{iv} In other words, this type of Roman marriage was sponsored by the presence of both religious and civic authorities. Jeaffreson provides this account of the Roman confarreatio:

Whilst she gave her right hand to her spouse the ancient Roman bride, married in accordance with the practices of confarreation, held in her left three wheat-ears, just as the English bride in later centuries bore in her hand or on her head a chaplet of bearded spikes of wheat (1873:201).

To explain this type of marriage further, Susan Treggiari, in her study of Roman marriage, describes a type of sacrificial cake made from the grain far, or farreum that was carried before the bride with intention of sacrificing it to Jupiter Farreus (1991:21-24). Marcia Seligson offers a more postmodern, gendered interpretation. She writes, “After sharing a wedge, the groom broke the remainder over his bride’s head, signifying both the breaking of the hymen and the dominance of male over female” (1973:97). In contrast to the more vigorous breaking action in the Roman marriage, the simple act of eating a sesame seed cake symbolized the union between the bride and groom in Greek wedding feasts. Westermarck observes that cross-culturally, for the bride and groom, “partaking of food in common . . . is a means of sealing their union by an act which has naturally been suggested by one of the most prominent features of married life; the husband’s sharing of food with his wife” (1922:452). A twentieth century spin on this would suggest that the wife shares food she has prepared with her husband or, perhaps, the overarching point is simply that the food sharing is mutual. Using a combination of Greek literary sources supplemented by Athenian vase paintings or lekani decorated by the Eleusinian Painter between 360 and 50 BCE, John H. Oakley and Rebecca H. Sinos use archeological evidence to point to the “prolific nature of the sesame seed, in the sense that it comes in such quantities; apparently it was believed to transmit this desirable quality to the new couple” (1993:23).

While the act of breaking of loaf over a couple’s head is distinctive from ingesting a seed cake, both actions are examples of sympathetic magic described by Sir James George Frazer (1922:12). In the former action, the couple is metaphorically showered with a basic (and hopefully bountiful) food supply while in the latter; they are literally internalizing the grain to be fertile themselves. In one instance, the laws of similarity apply and in the other, the laws of contiguity are relevant. What is important to note here is that, in either action, the relationship of grain to abundance and fertility cannot be overlooked or under-estimated. As Mannhardt writes in *Mythologie Forschungen*, there exists a “feeling of a sympathetic connection between mankind and seed-bearing grasses and the comparison between the fruit of the body and of corn” (quoted Westermarck 1922: 478). In light of this sympathetic association, it is no wonder that cakes at weddings are thought to contain magical properties.

That the Roman custom of breaking the loaf over the bride’s head was practiced later in parts of England is clear in Westermarck’s reference to the English practice of breaking a large cake over the heads of the couple in Siston, Gloucestershire at the beginning of the eighteenth century. Likewise, in

northeast Scotland, an oatmeal cake was broken over the bride's head. But, as Westermarck notes, over time the oatmeal cake evolved into a "thin cake of shortbread, called the bride-cake" (1922:476). Woloson references "ceremonial crackers of biscuits made of wheat, symbolizing abundance and plenty" which were thrown over the newlywed's heads as they crossed the threshold into their new home (2002:168). She interprets this traditionally English action as a form of community support as she observes, "Everyone present shared in eating this communal nod to future success. Breaking the crackers over the couple's heads, the community overtly sanctioned the union and recognized it as beneficial to the welfare of the whole society" (2002:168). Numerous folklore compilations cited by Westermarck refer to this practice throughout the British Isles and speak to the connection between grain and abundance symbolized through the presence of bread, crackers, biscuits or cake in the specific context of wedding ritual (Westermarck 1922: 464-84). Westermarck concludes that "It is an unwarranted assumption, then, that the custom of throwing grain, seeds, or dried fruit at weddings, wherever it is found, originated in a rite the exclusive object of which was to promote fecundity. To ensure prosperity and abundance and to avert evil may have been equally primitive motives for it" (1922: 484).

The Evolution of the Wedding Cake



Illustration 1. Table of Shewbread. Courtesy of mishkanministries.org.

Despite the clear connection to Greco-Roman fertility rites, some cultural critics disagree on the Anglo-American origins of the wedding cake. Charsley connects the wedding cake to a ceremonial form of sacred bread that evolved through time for use in the wedding feast while Jeffreason and Woloson ascribe the more secular origins of early wedding cake, described as a "stack of wedding buns covered with a thick icing" to French confectioners who followed Charles II from France to England after the Interregnum. Charsley describes the early wedding cake as a set of "stacked cakes, styled after the croquembourche, a cone-shaped structure, wide at the base, composed of round choux pastries filled with confectioner's cream and dripped or spun with hot toffee, that was covered with a layer of hardened white sugar frosting and decorated with entremets or figurines concocted from spun sugar" (1992:20). The croquembourche remains a traditional style for bridal cakes in parts of France and Belgium today but is only occasionally served at American wedding receptions. Brand argues that

the practice of a multi-tiered cake was derived from bridal cakes stacked one on top of another and placed between the bride and groom upon the banquet table. His source, based on evidence from an often quoted manuscript held in the British museum, dates before the English Civil Wars (1642 - 1651):

When I was a little boy (before the Civil Wars) I have seen, according to the Custome then, the Bride and Bridegroom kisse over the Bride-Cakes at the Table. It was about the latter end of Dinner; and the Cakes were layd one upon another, like the picture of the Shew-Bread in the old Bible (Brand 1777:355-6).

Shewbread was ritually consecrated unleavened bread displayed in the Tabernacle for use on the Sabbath (see Illustration 1). It resembles the squares of matzo bread used commemoratively in modern Jewish Passover Seders today. Thus, the historical and cultural connection between ritual and ceremonial loaves symbolizing abundance and plenty continues to be an important part of formal sacred observations that may resonate in the commonly symbolic breaking of communion wafers.

From Crackers to Sweetened Cake

The conversion of sugarless ceremonial crackers to sweetened cake signals what Sidney W. Mintz describes as the eighteenth-century “spread of sugar downward and outward” as “sugar lost many of its special meanings when the poor were also able to eat it” (1985:95). On one hand, Mintz argues “as sugar became more known, more “homey,” it was endowed with ritual meanings by those who consumed it, meanings specific to the social and cultural position of the users” (1985:122). In speaking of celebratory cakes, he observes, “wedding cakes with their elaborate icings and figures, the use of spices and sweets with meat and fowl at holidays, the use of sweet foods at rituals of separation and departure (including funerals), and a lexicon in which the imagery of sweetness figures importantly all suggest [social and political] continuity” (1985:123). Jeaffreson points to the elaborate concoctions of French bakers who coated “small, rectangular buns, - richly made with sugar, egg, milk, spices, and currants” with a thick white frosting. As sugar became more common, these cakes were eventually substituted for the unsweetened crackers” (1873:203-7). On the other hand, as Woloson observes, in social and gendered terms, sugar “assumed widely shared cultural meanings. By the end of the nineteenth century, it has lost its original meaning as a sign of masculine power and had been endowed with properties perceived as feminine, such as refinement, gentility, piety, and weakness” (2002:10).

The similarity between Greco-Roman ceremonial loaves and seed cakes and early eighteenth-century British wedding cake customs remains clear in John Brand’s *Observations on Popular Antiquities* published in Newcastle-upon-Tyne in 1777 where he writes:

The connection between the bride-cake and wedding is strongly marked in the custom still retained in Yorkshire, where the former is cut into little square pieces, thrown over the bridegroom’s and bride’s head, and then put through the ring. Sometimes it is broken over the bride’s head, and then thrown among the crowd to be scrambled for. In the North, slices of the bride-cake are put through the wedding ring; and they are

afterwards laid under pillows, at night, to cause young persons to dream of their lovers (1777:355).

Brand follows this citation with a note that “this custom is not peculiar to the North of England; it seems to prevail (in England) generally.” Through these examples, two manners of usage derived from Greco-Roman wedding ritual are clearly proscribed; the first, as an agent to be broken over the bride’s head, thrown at the bride and the groom or passed through a ring belonging to the bride; or to be shared and subsequently eaten as part of the ritual feast. In either usage, the connection to abundance and fertility remains clear. Celebratory cakes and their composition from seeds and grains evoke fertility properties that make them useful for divining marriage partners. Cake divinations appear cross-culturally on both sides of the Atlantic. Young, unmarried men and women often placed boxed cake under their pillows to “divine” future mates. Louisiana diarist Kate Stone writing in 1862 makes a specific reference in her Civil War journal to placing a piece of what she terms bride’s cake under her pillow to dream of her future husband.

The connection between cake and implied abundance for the newlyweds emerges clearly in John R. Gillis’ study of British marriages. He provides several different versions of what he terms threshold rites that took place the “moment the couple first occupied a separate dwelling. Brides were sometimes lifted across, but the doorstep was also the place for the bride to receive a small cake on a plate” (1985:75). He quotes from Richard Blakeborough’s *Wit, Character and Folklore and Custom of North Riding of Yorkshire* published in 1911, where Blakeborough describes the use of cake as follows:

A little of this she would eat, throwing the remainder over her head, typical of the hope that the couple might always have plenty and something to spare. Then she handed the plate to her husband; this he threw over his head, their future happiness depending on its being broken (Gillis 1985:93).

From this passage, we may see that the two usages of throwing and eating the cake have merged together. In another example, Brand references the popular custom of “breaking cake over the newlyweds” once they arrived home following the wedding ceremony at the church. Baker offers yet another version in her description of a Yorkshire wedding where “waiting for the bride’s arrival in Yorkshire was an attendant holding a cake upon a plate. The bride ate a little and threw the remainder over her head, ‘typical of the hope that the couple might always have plenty and something to spare’ and then passed the plate to her husband who threw it over his head, to fall, for their maximum happiness, in many pieces. Should, by ill chance, the plate not break when it hit the ground, a watchful guest would at once stamp upon it, for it was essential that it be broken and the greater the number of pieces, the greater the couple’s prospects of happiness” (1974:41). Again, it is clear that there is a symbolic connection between the cake and hopes for marital abundance.

From One Cake to Two

It is difficult to pinpoint with any accuracy just when, where and why the American practice of distinguishing the bride’s cake from the groom’s cake occurred. Jeaffreson writes that for English

weddings, two cakes were prepared, one as an ornament for the bridal table and the other to be broken over the bride's head (1873:50). According to Baker, the "modern form [of the wedding cake] spread from France in the seventeenth-century [where] there were two cakes, a rich, substantial "fruit-full" groom's cake and a lighter bride's cake, gay with spun sugar ornaments" (1873:111). (Cairns 2011). The veiled floral messages were derived from Kate Greenway's *Language of Flowers* published in 1884 and included the Bridal Rose, Oak and Acorns to represent strength and endurance. Also present were Lily of the Valley, Scottish Thistle and Irish Shamrock along with Lavender and, not surprisingly, Sweet William. The earliest recipe on record for English fruitcake appears in 1655 (Charsley, 1992:54). More popular and prolific is the fruitcake recipe for Mrs. Beeton's "Rich Bridecake," published in 1861 in her popular English cookbook:

5 lbs. of the finest flour, 3 lbs. of fresh butter, 5 lbs. of currants, 2 lbs. of sifted loaf sugar, 2 nutmegs, ¼ oz. of mace, ¼ oz. of cloves, 16 eggs, 1 lb. of sweet almonds, ½ lb. of candied citron, ½ lb. each of candied orange and lemon peel, 1 gill of wine, 1 gill of brandy.

Mrs. Beeton also included a recipe for "Black Cake," the British term for groom's cake, in *The Book of Household Management* in 1880. This recipe was printed along with instructions that the cake was to be "cut by the bridegroom and given to the bridesmaids, with a glass of wine, before going to the church" (Beeton 1880:51). Several references to the English practice of stacking two cakes together suggest that the lighter bride's cake was cut at the reception and the layer(s) of groom's cake were saved for future use, such as a christening (Charsley 1992:23, Woloson 2002:170). Charsley suggests that the tradition of two stacked cakes, one for the bride on the bottom, and one for the groom on the top, was preferred in America. He writes, "The bride's would be on the bottom. Bride and groom would cut it at the reception, give pieces to each other to eat, and it would be served to guests. The groom's would be mounted above it and saved for later consumption. Subsequently, it has been claimed, the groom's tended to drop out, as 'the second cake,' leaving the bride's to be regarded as the wedding cake" (1992:23). Logically, then, the fruit-laden ingredients of the groom's cake would allow for longer storage as fruitcakes require a period of aging.

The American tendency toward a lighter wedding cake to represent the bride may be seen in antebellum Louisiana plantation mistress' Martha Turnbull's recipe for bride's cake taken from *Family Recipes from Rosedown and Catalpa Plantations*:

Mrs. Dougherty's White or Brides Cake (Martha Turnbull) Whites of 18 Eggs, the weights of 12 Eggs in sugar, weight of 9 eggs in flour, & four of butter. Flavor with almond (Scott, Pitts and Thompson 2005:142).

Unlike Mrs. Beeton's recipe for wedding cake, there is no fruit in this cake. From the ingredients listed for Martha Turnbull's cake, it is clear that Woloson is correct in contrasting the highly refined properties of confectioner's sugar and white flour used for the American bride's cake. She further argues that "the dark and edifying groom's cake, was eventually completely supplanted by the white

bride's cake, . . . [which] stood to be appreciated for its beauty alone" (2002:176). The comparison between the American Victorian bride and her cake as an "ornamental showpiece," Woloson suggests, "confirmed the status of an entire family, and established the dominance of a husband over his wife by equating her with a decoration whose roles and appearances he could undermine" (2002:175). However, the idea of two cakes resurfaces in an American book on wedding traditions that appeared in the 1970's. In light of the sexual politics of the time, journalist Marcia Seligson comments, "What we think of today as the wedding cake is actually the 'bride's cake' - frilly, decorative, not meant to be eaten. The 'groom's cake' was dark, a fruitcake, practical, substantial. The sexist implications rise like yeast" (1973:98). The gendered assumptions reflected in the Victorian period and conveyed into the twentieth century along with the popular elaborate, ornamental confectionery work have given way to contemporary American wedding cakes, still tiered and decorated but not in the exaggerated Victorian style. The dark fruitcake of the Victorian period has evolved into the contemporary tradition of the chocolate groom's cake that still persists in the southern part of the United States.

Reading the Encoded Language of the Cakes

In contrast to the highly feminized lighter bride's cake, the chocolate groom's cake overtly expresses southern male identity and conveys aspects of masculine character and personality in a localized type of improvisation on a traditional form. In southeastern Louisiana, the groom's cake is infrequently served at the rehearsal dinner at the end of the meal either as a prelude or to follow toasting. (In southern tradition, toasting the bride and groom is often reserved for this intimate family gathering instead of the more public space of the wedding reception). Or, as noted previously, the presentation and cutting of the groom's cake is more commonly connected to the cake cutting ritual of the larger wedding cake and is part of the highly anticipated event during the wedding reception.

Kyleen Kiger-Smith is a recent Food Network bake-off contestant and the creative director of Fairy Dust Cakes, a cake bakery located in Denham Springs, Louisiana, which specializes in cakes for weddings. In her experience, the groom's cake is usually a surprise gift from the bride or less frequently, from the groom's mother. Thus, the sign that signifies the groom in the public/private space of the wedding reception is typically presented through a female lens. Once in a while, other family members may pick the groom's cake. Only one of the cakes that I present in this section was selected as a gift from the bride's parents to their new son-in-law; all of the others were chosen by the bride as a gift for her groom. Rarely does the groom participate in choosing his own cake or even have input into what is selected to represent him before the community of wedding guests. Additionally, the groom's cakes that I observed in all-black southeastern Louisiana weddings transcended any hints of racial identity by celebrating the groom's authoritative position and communal respectability. At one such wedding, a two-layered cake commemorated the groom's Marine background. The lower cake was made to represent his Dress Blues, the distinctive dark blue military jacket trimmed with red and gold insignia. The distinguishing highlight of the cake was the Dress Frame, or unique Marine headgear, made of white fondant-covered Rice Krispies and completed with a shiny black bill. From this example and others I encountered during my field research, I suggest that the presence of the groom's cake alludes to a type of southern masculine distinctiveness that supersedes the problematic triad of gender, race

and class that often troubles critics of southern culture. In the case of the black Marine groom, the bride communally celebrated his masculine dependability and reliability in service to his country.

At other weddings I attended, the groom's cakes reveled in their display of hegemonic masculine characteristics closely tied to an overtly regional identity. The most prevalent theme for southeastern Louisiana groom's cakes portrays the groom as a sports fan or expresses his team solidarity through localized football, baseball, golf or basketball fan cakes. Kiger-Smith and other area bakers feature numerous cakes in the shape of Tiger Stadium, the playing field of the enormously popular Fighting Tigers of Louisiana State University, the distinctively shaped Pete Marovich Assembly Center, commonly referred to as the PMAC, at LSU and other well-known professional sports arenas such as Wrigley Field and Yankee Stadium. Other fan related grooms' cakes depict a team cooler filled with the groom's favorite beer. These cakes appear to serve as commentary from the bride celebrating her groom as a "man's man." He participates in conventionally masculine activities: watching a sports game and/or drinking beer while watching the game. Other cakes reflect the groom's status as a team player by depicting his personal football helmet, basketball jersey, baseball cap or golf bag along with his winning golf clubs. These cakes reflect a movement from fan participation to a higher performance of masculine skill and ability. We may view this type of cake as a commentary by the bride who views her groom as a vital player/member of a highly competitive college sports team.

Yet, at other times, the groom's cake may be seen as a critique of heterosexist constructions of masculinity. One of Kiger-Smith's brides covered her groom's cake table with artificial turf and placed a photograph of herself in her bridal gown at a putting green alongside a large golf ball-shaped groom's cake. The couple chose tees and golf balls inscribed with their names and wedding date as favors. When I asked her to interpret this groom's cake, Kiger-Smith read the cake and the accompanying display as the bride "truly taking her place in the groom's life." To take Kiger-Smith's interpretation of the cake one step further, I suggest, it appears that the bride may be subliminally usurping or competing with her new husband's favorite leisure time activity through the medium of the cake by visually interjecting herself into the space allotted to display his preferential hobby. Thus, metaphorically, the potential exists for the cake to signal impending tensions between the bride and her groom's masculine hobbies or interests that may exclude her or conflict with her control.



Illustration 2. A Crawfish Boil. Courtesy of Kyleen Kiger-Smith, Fairy Dust Cakes.

Another popular theme on display in southeastern Louisiana groom's cake designs celebrates specific masculine culinary skills such as the crawfish boil (see Illustration 2) that C. Paige Gutierrez identifies as "men's work" (1984:175). The crawfish boil is a community gathering where the men cook crawfish, corn and small red potatoes in a large specialized pot while some of the guests drink beer and observe the cooking. As men do the cooking and no plates or other utensils are used, the domestic nature of the crawfish boil relegates women to the sidelines. The cake pictured here celebrates the crawfish boil as a space of plentiful masculine achievement as the prolific contents of the pot spills over to feed those gathered for the event. In this cake, the successful performance of male food preparation is highlighted in the abundance of the crawfish pot that literally overflows its contents over onto the table. The cake in this photograph is entirely edible. The crawfish pot is made entirely of chocolate cake and covered with silvery grey fondant. The crawfish, corn, potatoes and paddle are also made of fondant that has been airbrushed with realistic colors. For this particular cake, the newspaper placed beneath the cake relates the names of the bride and groom and communicates personal details of the wedding. In that respect, we may view the presence of the newspaper as twofold; first it depicts women's nominal responsibility to prepare the food table by covering it with newspaper and secondly, it publically records the noteworthy event of this new union. I read the crawfish cake as the bride celebrating her groom's ability to successfully participate in a localized display of masculine culinary prowess. The crawfish cake is a popular style and many different versions of this cake are available from bakeries throughout southeastern Louisiana.



Illustration 3. Groom Paddling his Pirogue. Courtesy of Kyleen Kiger-Smith, Fairy Dust Cakes.

Southeastern Louisiana is commonly identified as a "Sportsman's Paradise" and hunting and fishing are also the subject of many groom's cakes. One of Kiger-Smith's cakes made for a hunter was topped with wooden doe and buck figurines that the bride appropriated from a family clock. Another cake portrays a likeness of the groom paddling his pirogue in a swamp of cypress trees and knees (see Illustration 3). The pirogue, long a signifier of Cajun material culture and tradition passed down from generation to generation, places the groom firmly in the watery southeastern Louisiana landscape. In a larger photograph of the cake, the snout of an enormous alligator is barely visible above the water as it is hiding deep in the muted tones of the swamp. I read this cake as the bride acknowledging her groom's accomplished ability to negotiate the Louisiana swamp in a small boat by himself. This groom is a

man's man, dressed in camouflage, skillfully negotiating the watery landscape of the cypress swamp, armed against the forces of nature with a single shotgun.



Illustration 4. Largemouth Bass Devouring Bride. Courtesy of Kyleen Kiger-Smith, Fairy Dust Cakes.



Illustration 5. Fishing. Courtesy of Kyleen Kiger-Smith, Fairy Dust Cakes.

Photographs of two of Kiger-Smith's groom's cakes that I find intriguing are reproduced here. In the first cake, the fish, identified as a largemouth bass, is literally swallowing the bride who is distinguishable only by the hem of her gown and her white high heels (see Illustration 4). The popularity of this southern style of sport fishing suggests that the bride sees herself as being swallowed by the enormity of her husband's passion for fishing. When viewed as coded commentary, this bride's sense of humor reveals her belief that she is no competition for her groom's fishing hobby. This cake provides a space for her lighthearted critique of his hobby as almost literally consuming her. Even on her wedding day, a day that is all about the bride, the fish is the trophy rather than the bride and the center of this groom's attention. In the second cake, the groom's prowess is underscored by the type of

his catch (see Illustration 5). Instead of a trophy fish, he has reeled in a large inner tube. His great physical effort for this catch is conveyed by the posturing and the facial grimaces depicted on the fondant likeness of the groom. I read this cake as the bride's tongue-in-cheek commentary of her groom's lack of masculine competence.



Illustration 6. Operation. Courtesy of Kyleen Kiger-Smith, Fairy Dust Cakes.

Additionally, groom's cakes that celebrate the educational background and scholastic achievement of the groom in the professions of medicine, law, and dentistry are popular. A widespread design is the doctor's coat replete with a fondant stethoscope and pen. The doctor's name and the hospital insignia reflect the bride's pride in her groom's choice of occupation. On the other hand, the bride may invert her physician husband's occupation through the selection of a groom's cake that playfully represents his job performance as a game. Created by Hasbro, the game "Operation" involves the skillful removal of organs and bones from a patient identified as "Cavity Sam." The object of the game, to perform successful operations, is transferred to the medium of the groom's cake pictured here (see Illustration 6). The "Operation" groom's cake, a popular cake in photo galleries for many southeastern Louisiana bakeries, recreates the "Funatomy" removable parts that suggest the groom's surgical prowess onto an edible cake.

In contrast to the masculine educational attainment that these groom's cakes applaud, the bride's femininity rather than her scholastic success is celebrated in the space of the wedding. According to Emily Post's rules of etiquette, the only place where the bride's educational background is to be publically mentioned is in the engagement or wedding announcement. In contrast to the intentional silence concerning feminine scholarly achievement, there are prolific variations in the design of groom's cakes celebrating male academic and financial success.



Illustration 7. Glock Pistol. Courtesy of Kyleen Kiger-Smith, Fairy Dust Cakes.



Illustration 8. Just for the Record. Courtesy of Maida Owens.



Illustration 9. Toilet Cake. Courtesy of CakeCentral.com.

Some groom's cakes may thematically depict a career in construction or law enforcement or highlight the tools used by members of these professions. In the cake pictured here, the chocolate cake is shaped like a Glock pistol, the most common gun used by law enforcement agencies (see Illustration 7). The chocolate cake is covered in olive green fondant and accompanied by a badge, bullets and handcuffs to represent the deputy sheriff's tools. A photograph of the couple handcuffed together sits beside the cake. We might read this presentation as the bride sharing her willingness to be apprehended by male authority which is represented not only by the groom's position within the criminal justice system but also by patriarchal interpretations of marriage. Through the medium of the cake, the bride may be commenting on her groom's successful appropriation of powerful objects that are socially sanctioned through his choice of occupation. A Freudian folklorist might see this cake as representing the groom's possession of a well-known phallic symbol, the gun.

The bride may select her groom's musical talent or hobby as the theme of her groom's cake. Various bakeries in southeastern Louisiana create groom's cakes that represent or depict the groom's favorite musical instrument. Of these, guitars, drums, and saxophones are the most prevalent. At other times, the cake may display a special message from the bride to her groom. The groom's cake pictured here offers a double entendre by framing the bride's affection for her groom in terms of his hobby of listening to music (see Illustration 8). The record may be read literally as a concrete object expressing feelings of endearment but in the context of the communal nature of wedding ritual, this groom's cake may also be a metonym for the public record of the marriage itself in terms of civic documentation.

Occasionally, the cake may satirize the groom's profession, thereby introducing elements of the carnivalesque. The bride or her family may playfully invert the groom's authority over his bride by making fun of him through his occupation. One such example is a groom's cake made for a plumber (see Illustration 9). Created by three large pieces of cake, one for the toilet tank, one for the base and one for the bowl, the chocolate cake is all covered in white fondant. The toilet seat is also fashioned of fondant as is the small piece of toilet paper inadvertently left on the seat. The plunger and tools are made from rolled fondant and air brushed for realistic color. The fecal remains in the bowl are very imaginatively made from Tootsie rolls. On a literal level, this groom's cake serves as a comic reminder that this man is often left to deal with unpleasant things such as raw sewage in connection to his profession. Despite its very comic nature and scatological content, some may view this groom's cake as an expression of sympathy from the bride's parents who ordered this cake. Or, are they, his new in-laws, demeaning him by portraying a very graphic image of his choice of occupation? Regardless of bride's parents' intent in selecting this cake for their new son-in-law, the toilet cake ritualizes anti-ritual in the Bakhtinian sense of subverting the groom's authority during the ritual space of the wedding reception in the presentation of grotesque images (see Bakhtin 1984). By bringing this common everyday reminder of material bodily function into the space of wedding ritual, our distaste of the repugnant is transformed through laughter.



Illustration 10. Cockroach Cake. Courtesy of Kyleen Kiger-Smith, Fairy Dust Cakes.

One of Kiger-Smith's funniest cakes was made for an exterminator (see Illustration 10). In this case, a cockroach, the bane of southern existence, lies on his back swilling a brand of beer that is a regional favorite in southeastern Louisiana. Depicted on his back, this cockroach is not dead but very much alive as he "swills" beer from a can clutched and wrapped in his numerous legs. This cake may be read as a humorous commentary that the groom has not only "failed" in his job to get rid of the cockroach but that the cockroach has "bested" the groom by stealing his beer and eating his pretzels. Not only has this pesky insect staved off his own demise but he has also appropriated items that denote relaxation for the groom's leisure time. Even the vases of white roses beside this cake cannot soften this suggestion of the grotesque. The cockroach is made from chocolate cake, covered with fondant that has been airbrushed in realistic colors. The beer can is an actual can that is placed between the fondant-rolled legs of the insect. Black licorice was used for the feelers.

Steel Magnolias and the Armadillo Groom's Cake



Illustration 11. Armadillo. Groom's Guide for Weddings.com

The armadillo groom's cake in *Steel Magnolias*, an off-Broadway play written by Robert Harling in 1985, following his sister's death, provides a terminus post quem for identifying an oikotype for what has

become a groom's cake trend at Louisiana wedding receptions not just in southeastern Louisiana but throughout the state (see Illustration 11). The play opens as a community of women in Natchitoches, Louisiana prepares for the wedding of Shelby Eatenton to Jackson Latcherie. The film version, produced in 1989 by Herbert Brown Ross, starred Sally Fields, Dolly Parton, Shirley MacLaine, Olympia Dukakis and Julia Roberts as Shelby, the reigning town belle. As Tara McPherson notes, the film version "opens with the preparations for the young belle Shelby's wedding in full swing and also delineates the 'proper' behaviors for southern women, both troubling and embracing the power of decorum and the well-mannered belle" (2003:159).

One of the first visual signifiers in the film that suggests the upcoming nuptials is the delivery of an enormous wedding cake. In the opening frames of the film, we see two men stagger under the weight of a gigantic three-tiered pink wedding cake as they carefully maneuver the huge cake from the delivery van into the Eatenton home. An extravagant yet traditional bride and groom cake topper completely surrounded by delicate pink roses is clustered on the top tier of the cake. Meanwhile, at Truvy's Beauty Spot, Shelby and her mother are commenting the choice of colors for the wedding:

Shelby. My colors are blush and bashful. I have chosen two shades of pink. One is much deeper than the other. M'Lynn. The bridesmaids' dresses are beautiful... Shelby. And the ceremony will be too. All the walls are banked with sprays of flowers in the two shades of blush and bashful. There's a pink carpet specially laid for the service. And pink silk bunting draped over anything that would stand still. M'Lynn. That sanctuary looks like it's been hosed down with Pepto-Bismol (Harling 1998:18).

As this passage reveals, Shelby's overly-feminine pink wedding vision is her pragmatic mother's nightmare. As McPherson points out, "Shelby waxes poetic about the carefully orchestrated setting she has constructed for her wedding, a girlish fantasy of all things pink, including nine bridesmaids, yards of rosey-hued silk bunting, and a church decked out in her signature shades, blush and bashful" (2003:160). In Shelby's fantasy wedding even the wedding cake is tinged a feminine shade of pink.

Jackson's coarse armadillo groom's cake is presented to contrast with the pink overtly genteel space of Shelby's wedding. At Truvy's, Shelby and her mother deliberate on the groom's cake:

Shelby. The wedding cake will be by the pool. The groom's cake will be hidden in the carport. M'Lynn. Shelby and I agree on one thing. Shelby. The groom's cake. It's awful! It's in the shape of a giant armadillo. Truvy. An armadillo? Shelby. Jackson wanted a cake in the shape of an armadillo. He has an aunt that makes them. Clairee. It's unusual. M'Lynn. It's repulsive. It has gray icing. I can't even think of how you would make gray icing. Shelby. Worse! The cake part is red velvet cake. Blood red! People are going to be hacking into this animal that looks like it's bleeding to death (Harling 1998:19).

I suggest that the armadillo cake may be read as Harling's encoded message about social, economic and class distinctions between the two merging families. On a literal level, Red Velvet Cake is considered a southern recipe. Yet in this context, the cake color of the groom's cake, while still a form of the expected chocolate, becomes suggestive of consuming raw flesh. Cutting into the blood red cake, or as Shelby terms it, "hacking" into it becomes a primal act. The brute nature of Jackson's aunt's cake-making ability (only the snake is omitted due to lack of counter space) connects the Latcherie family to people who are accustomed to living on the land. In contrast, Shelby's people are town folks. It is in this light that we may view the cake as a subtle commentary on differences in economic class and social status. The Eatenton family represents a modern version of plantation culture with Drum as the planter, M'Lynn as the southern lady and Shelby as the belle. Repeatedly, M'Lynn refers to Jackson's family with their distinctive surname as living outside of town. The wedding merges these two distinctly different families together and reading the language of the cakes becomes a way of interpreting Harling's commentary on these distinctions.

The consensus in Shelby's family is that the armadillo groom's cake is, in M'Lynn's southern parlance, "tacky." In the South, calling something or someone "tacky" conveys a pronouncement of extreme lack of taste along with questionable social judgment. During the reception, M'Lynn and Shelby sequester the armadillo cake in the carport, even using the word "hide" to describe their actions. The fact that Jackson has chosen the cake and it is not a surprise gift from Shelby is another subtle commentary on his taste; one that M'Lynn expands on when she remarks, "Jackson is from a good old Southern family with good old southern values. You shoot it, stuff it, or marry it" (Harling, 1998:20). Enumerated in M'Lynn's commentary, southern masculine actions equate marriage with male virility in both hunting and preserving the spoils. In that sense, both the bride and the cake are the groom's trophies of his hunt. M'Lynn, however, has the last word on the cake, embodying McPherson's observation that "[t]he southern woman is figured as the keeper of family values, the self-sacrificing core that holds the family in its centripetal orbit, articulating the power of sisterhood and female playfulness to conservative notions of family and femininity" (2003:164). Despite their inability to agree on other issues surrounding the wedding, as respectable southern women, it is significant that both M'Lynn and Shelby agree on the impropriety of the armadillo groom's cake.

In spite of Harling's intention in presenting the armadillo groom's cake as a socially coded commentary on the lower class status of Shelby's choice of husband, or M'Lynn and Shelby's denunciation of the cake as "tacky," in the decades following the film, the popularity of the armadillo groom's cake has surged. In wedding receptions throughout the entire state of Louisiana, the armadillo groom's cake is exemplary of the power of oikotypes. A simple internet search for "armadillo groom's cakes" yields literally hundreds of versions of this type of groom's cake available in bakeries throughout Louisiana. In the April 2012 issue of the Baton Rouge monthly magazine, *Country Roads*, an armadillo groom's cake was at the center of a lengthy feature article on a local area baker. Creating her cake by covering layers of red velvet cake with gray fondant frosting and air brushing realistic markings, the area baker proudly discussed her customized cake creation. For approximately two hundred and fifty dollars,

modern brides may purchase their own “tacky,” groom’s cake from this baker or many others throughout the state.

Conclusion

In what may be a survival of the antebellum tradition of “infare,” or the practice of the newly married couple visiting the groom’s family for a reception including a meal and a special cake in the days following the wedding, the chocolate groom’s cake is entrenched in southern wedding receptions today. The presence of two cakes represents a gendered performance of Southern identity that is, according to James C. Cobb, founded within a group with a “shared sense of a common past” (2005:6). This past reaches back into the antebellum period and touches on behavioral prescriptions demanded by southern ladies and gentlemen.

Accordingly, the tenants of southern womanhood established during the antebellum period, maintain that a good southern wife is one who submits to the patriarchy by allowing her husband to be the virile master of his environment. When compared with the virginal wedding cake that stands on its pedestal as a pristine display of historically determined virtuous southern womanhood that denotes elegance, remoteness, and beauty, the groom’s cake may be viewed as encoded commentary on hegemonic constructions of southern masculinity from a feminine perspective. The chocolate groom’s cake not only demonstrates the bride’s vision of her groom’s masculine performance but also reveals her comprehension of his positioning within their social sphere. Certainly a cake that revels in notions of virility, primal honor and personal achievement must be viewed as a display of feminine pride in southern male identity. Or, conversely, a cake that critiques notions of masculine performance must be viewed as a breakthrough of the notions of Old South gendered prescriptions. The politics of identity, responsible for fostering the gendered perceptions of what behaviors and characteristics constitute southern ladies and southern gentlemen, is played out in the language of the cakes on display in southeastern Louisiana wedding receptions.

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