

CAKE IS HALAL, FAT IS SINFUL

Cake and Representation in Norway

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Cake is mandatory at celebrations in Norway and a very important female contribution. But due to its sweet and fatty ingredients the cake has become a metonym for obesity, and thus an important sign in the battle against the national weight problem. Playing a part in many different contexts, the cake is torn between different kinds of orthodoxy. In this article we describe layers of meaning by introducing three settings, which are very different in character yet able to link through our use of the cake as a common denominator: the cultural institution of coffee and cakes in a Norwegian rural village, cakes served and controlled in an educational institution for minority women and cakes as part of Friday get-togethers at an academic institution.

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The modern anthropological study of the cake starts with Mary Douglas' and Michael Nicod's analysis of biscuits in *Taking the Biscuit: The Structure of British Meals* from 1974. Their objective is to show the structure of meals. The biscuit is interesting as an anomaly; it does not fit in as breakfast, lunch or dinner, neither in form nor in content, and yet it is eaten all the time.

Cake research has been scant in Norwegian ethnography and anthropology. Apart from Sørhaug's (1996) analysis of the implication of cakes in the *dugnad* (voluntary communal work),¹ there have only been sporadic analyses of the cake in a Norwegian context. However, it sometimes appears as an ethnographic example that emphasises different cultural phenomena, for example when Borchgrevink (1995) describes how the mother-in-law arrives with an armful of cakes as a sign of conflict and owner-

ship of the man. Or in Gullestad (1984) and Thorsen (1994), where baking cakes for Christmas is analysed as important for women's identity.

In our widely diverging fieldworks at an adult education institution in Groruddalen in Oslo in 2011, and Torsvik, a rural suburb with 400 inhabitants in Østfold county in 1998, we have found that cake is quite significant as a means of communication (Garnaas 2012; Døving 2002).

In Døving's field study from Torsvik, Østfold, the scientific point was to follow the implications and network of food from a feminine point of view. Through interviews with women of different generations and participant observation in various social gatherings the study explored how the informants related to food both discursively and in practise. The cake emerged as a very significant aspect of female contributions and representation, both in formal

and informal contexts. The cake was central to several discourses, such as in the exchange of cake recipes and self-irony concerning how much they baked.

Garnaas did her fieldwork at an adult education institution for immigrants in Groruddalen, a district of Oslo with a large minority population. Her study observed the interaction between teachers and students, and focused particularly on how ideas of health were communicated. Here, too, the cake was a central issue, but more as a source of conflict between ethnic Norwegian teachers and Muslim students as representatives of two different knowledge regimes. These knowledge regimes each had their own cultural logic based on two different eating rules: Norwegian ideas of health and the Muslim distinction halal/haram. The cake was regarded as halal, and thus as safe food for Muslim students, but according to the cultural logic represented by the Norwegian teachers it was regarded as unsafe or non-approved due to the high content of sugar and fat.

In particular one pivotal scene in Garnaas' fieldwork provided the starting point of this analysis: During a carnival a student with diabetes helped herself to several pieces of cake. First, a fellow student commented that there was a lot of sugar in the cake and that she therefore should not eat it. The student with diabetes then divided one of the cake pieces in four and said that she would only eat a few bites. The teacher reacted by asking if the student could pass her the plate with the cake. She took the plate and later threw the pieces of cake in the garbage can (Garnaas 2012: 75).

In this article we ask: What is it about cake that makes a teacher at an adult education institution take such repressive measures against an immigrant woman who wants to eat a product that is otherwise so important as a female contribution?

Hence, the starting point is two different sets of data where cake was especially relevant. Cake is regarded as a prism, as a "total social phenomenon" (Mauss [1923–24]1995; Døving 2003); the aim is to find the implications that are relevant to explain cake in general and the scene in particular. We use the significant presence of the cake during our field-

works as a starting point for an exploration of the relations between folk culture, class and multicultural Norway. Holding up the cake as a common denominator, we proceed with a culture-analytical bricolage method where we initially contrast very different types of materials (Ehn & Löfgren 2012). In order to contextualise the general and specific aspects of the cake we have challenged our fields by also collecting observations from the various institutions where we have worked. We have also distributed a questionnaire and interviewed some Norwegian anthropologists about their observations on cake.² In this way we have looked at the meaning of cake in various Norwegian contexts: What is a cake? In what contexts is cake important and why? Empirical data from our two fieldworks and findings from other Norwegian anthropologists show that the cake appears both in urban and rural settings, and among both young and old. It is central to birthday celebrations, voluntary communal work, coffee breaks and as a celebration of the end of the working week.

We intend to examine the changing role of the cake in Norway by focusing on the increased cultural diversity and a new view of health. What persists and what changes? How can continuity and change be understood through the study of cake? First we will descriptively show how, when and with whom cake is consumed in Norway, and also describe its contents and its place as a ritual marker in the meal grammar. Then we will interpret the meaning of cake as a female contribution, as metonym for obesity, as a medium between immigrants and Norwegians and even as a class conflict.

What Is a Cake?

A cake is a pastry with a high content of fat and sugar. The most important ingredients are flour, dairy products (butter, cream, cheese), sugar, eggs and baking soda, with countless additional ingredients that often give the cake its name. Cocoa (chocolate) and almonds (marzipan) are the most common, but carrots, fruits, berries and other nuts are also frequently used in Norway, as in the rest of Europe (Lönnqvist 1997). Cakes can in some cases also be yeast based; when buns stretch and become a *kringle*

(a pastry ring) they turn into cake, especially if it is decorated. The cake can also be biscuit-like, particularly the ones that are made for Christmas (almond tuiles, gingerbread, sand cakes etc.).³

The most common generic cakes in Norway are cream cake, marzipan cake, apple cake, chocolate cake and cheesecake. The most common special cakes appear to be *kransekake* (almond ring cake), which is often used at christenings, anniversaries and weddings, *napoleonskake* (vanilla slice) and *julekake* (Christmas bread), but there are several thousand different varieties. The aesthetics of the cake seems to be very important, particularly in representational settings. In a European historical setting where hunger was more prominent, cake was a distinguishing mark. Lönnqvist (1997) describes an abundance of lavish cakes as a crucial sign of affluence and wealth at the table of the rich. This seems to hold true even today in rural areas of Norway.

Baking cakes is a specialized profession with a four-year education. Becoming a pastry chef requires two years of hospitality and food studies, as well as two years of practice in the industry. The pastry chef's shop, the *konditori*, was until recently a common term for a café. Today, cakes are sold relatively widely and in great variety in bakeries, coffee shops, kiosks, as desserts in restaurants and frozen or wrapped in plastic in grocery stores.

Like Douglas and Nicod we find that the Norwegian biscuit is not altogether a cake. One could imagine a continuum between bread and cake, encompassing various baked goods that are difficult to categorise. When the biscuit becomes a chocolate or a cake it is categorised as "sweets." The distinction between biscuit and cake therefore becomes important because it decides the relationship between healthy and unhealthy. "In Decision on excise duties on chocolate and sugar confectionary etc." determined by the Ministry of Finance and Customs in 1990, pursuant to the decision of the Storting on excise duties on chocolate and sugar confectionary etc., we find the following definition of biscuits:

3. Biscuit:

a. ex 19.05.3001 – sweet biscuits and cookies

b. ex 19.05.3002 – waffles and wafers

Products under a and b are taxable when they are:

I Completely covered (with the possible exception of the bottom) in chocolate (cocoa) and/or sugar confectionary.

II Partially covered and/or has interlayers of a mass as described under I, and where the weight of the mass makes up more than 50 percent of the total weight of the biscuit.⁴

In the example above we see that only "sweet biscuits" are taxable, and consequently the biscuit cannot be "completely covered" in chocolate (cocoa) or sugar confectionary. More than 50 percent chocolate thus transforms a biscuit into a cake and is included in the category sweets for legal purposes. The distinction between cake and biscuit reveals two mutually exclusive categories.

There is a general political consensus on the taxation of sweets in Norway. The excise duty that was introduced on chocolate and sugar confectionary in 1922 is first and foremost fiscal, but is also justified on health grounds.⁵ Except for a simplified sugar tax in 1981 the policy has remained unchanged with changing governments: "At the introduction of the tax it was also pointed out that from a health and nutrition perspective such a tax could be beneficial as a measure to reduce sugar consumption" (cf. St.prp. no. 1 1980–1981). Regulating fat in the same manner is a completely different story. The reason that sugar has been taxed rather than fat, is that sugar has never been part of Norwegian agricultural production (Kjærnes & Døving 2009). Butter and milk, produced by an increasingly well-managed industry cooperatively owned by the dairy farmers, became key elements of the new food policy based on subsidies and import tariffs (Kjærnes 1995). Fat was linked to important domestic interests and extensive political intervention. This was a challenge for policy bodies like the National Nutrition Council, which based its recommendations on consensual, negotiated solutions involving all concerned parties (Kjærnes & Døving 2009).

Cake and Obesity

Cake may also be a metonym for the weight increase in the Norwegian population. Eating sweets outside of the permitted contexts has been found to be a characteristic sign of decay and obesity (Døving 2007b). The notion is that fat people stuff themselves uncontrollably with sugar and fat on weekdays. Thus they break the fundamental social contract inherent in “the work approach”: that you should perform in order to enjoy. The result is social decay. “It would be Saturday all week” is a common saying in Norway.

The discursive universe of cake is also quite ritualised. Women’s magazines shift systematically between cake recipes for Christmas and Constitution Day (May 17),⁶ and matching dieting advice on January 2 and before “the bikini season.” Thus the biggest tabloid newspaper, VG, writes: “May 17 and cake belong together. This day you can forget the calories and just enjoy the temptations with a clear conscience.”⁷

In some narrowly defined and ritual space times you are allowed a “clear conscience” about eating cake.⁸ Afterwards you enter a post-Christian fasting period, which is all about losing weight and being aesthetically and physically attractive. There is much evidence that respectable abstinence from cake is a form of discipline related to social class.

The indignity of overweight is mirrored in the indignation of the Other. The absence of self-control in others gives rise to indignation. It is this indignation that legitimates intervention, and this is convenient in the field of politics (Døving 2007b). When obesity is interpreted as a sign of lack of self-control it gives licence to both the punishing and the helping state. The fat must be controlled. How can we make sure that the whole population does not swell? The phenomenon of obesity thus has a moral that makes it an extremely effective medium in a political disciplining project. The obese have sinned against the relation between weekdays and weekends, they have stuffed themselves with cake in the middle of the week. It is evident in our material that there are sociological differences related to cake and obesity. There is a direct correlation between health and higher education (Brekke & Kverndokk 2011). Peo-

ple with higher education in general also seem to be more concerned with health and fitness. For those who take on the responsibility for controlling other people’s fat it will thus be doubly important to stay thin.

The Time, Space and Person of the Cake

The most obvious use of cake is as a dessert in connection with ritual celebrations, or more precisely after dessert, as an extraordinary meal. It also features prominently in rites of transition. The birthday cake is the most common and important example. It also has a name at weddings: the wedding cake. In both these rituals, the cake is displayed explicitly. When the birthday cake is brought out the person who is going through this simple annual transition ritual must blow out the candles as a sign of good fortune while the other members of the group sing and applaud. The cake is also used in the important year cycle celebration of May 17, the Constitution Day, where the almond ring cake with flags often is a centrepiece. The cake is thus an important marker in celebrations. According to Scott (2007), children who for various reasons did not have a birthday party in their home with their schoolmates say that they have celebrated by eating cake at home with their family or at school.

Many public institutions have established Friday afternoon cake as a celebration of the weekly cycle, to mark the transition to the weekend. It is also used as a celebration when someone has a baby, leaves work or begins, when a colleague has been promoted, or when the organisation has got a new order or won a prize. It is common in sewing circles, at meetings in the society of rural women (*bondekvinnelaget*), during voluntary cooperation on various tasks and chores in the community (*dugnad*), and as a prize in cake raffles. It is also used in semi-private settings when people want to enjoy themselves, to “indulge in something extra.”

Cake is strongly connected to coffee, as evident in the popular convention “coffee and cake.” Drinking coffee in public is a common narrative about the emergence of what is often called “modern man” (Bell & Valentine 1997; Leclant 1979). Coffee arrived

relatively late in Norway, and it was an upper-class drink until the end of the eighteenth century. Valeri (1991) describes how coffee was used among less affluent groups in Sweden in the middle of the nineteenth century, while it was still a high status drink in the urban coffee houses. During the 1800s coffee became a popular social drink in the Nordic countries and replaced much of the spirits consumption. It was a democratic way of socialising, a drink that could be served to anybody (Ehn & Löfgren 2012). The history of cakes parallels that of coffee. According to Lönnqvist (1997) the cake became a dessert at the end of the seventeenth century. Before that time pastry was usually incorporated in other dishes. The development of the art of pastry coincides with the spread of sugar in Europe in the eighteenth century (Mintz 1985). Bakeries also coincide with the emergence of the European coffee houses, where it became a culinary tradition to eat some sweet pastry together with the coffee (Lönnqvist 1997).

Telste, Grønstad and Damstuen (2012) show how coffee in Norway went from being an exotic drink to becoming a popular institution during the twentieth century. Nowadays, the drink is synonymous with “an invitation” (Døving 2003). In Scandinavia coffee is associated with breaks, and in traditional settings the simple meal “coffee and cake” is often accompanied by a simple type of cake (Lien 1989; Ehn & Löfgren 2012).

As the contexts show cake is first and foremost ritual, but also central to the Norwegian post-Lutheran reward system, as a reward for well executed asceticism (Døving 2004). The Norwegian meal pattern is characterised by ascetic bread meals and packed lunches for breakfast and lunch on weekdays, and simple, ascetic everyday dinners, combined with more extravagant weekend dinners with more fat, sugar and alcohol (Bugge & Døving 2000). Norwegians spend a lot of time in their home and eat out primarily on special occasions to celebrate (ibid.). Weekday and weekend (leisure time) are the most fundamental categories in the moral order of food in Norway (Døving 2003). This is associated with “the work approach” to welfare, where work gives the right to welfare benefits. Working all week gives the

right to the institutions of “Saturday night sweets” and “Friday night beer”; working all year gives the right to a holiday allowance, and all your life the right to a pension.⁹ The same is true for meals. If you have eaten your dinner you have earned the right to dessert (Døving 2004, 2007a). If cake is eaten outside of celebrations, it is necessary to come up with other contributions as a pretext (Døving 2007a). Hence, the reward aspect is introduced as “an exception.”

The work approach is an ideology rooted in the Protestant work ethic and at the same time a vision of how to improve society (Vike 2004). Foucault shows that these moral codes have been relatively stable, but the reasons for maintaining the moral codes change (Coveney 2006: 43).¹⁰ Earlier a controlled relationship to food would “save your soul,” whereas today control is exercised for the sake of the body, and particularly in order to shape the body in accordance with the ideal of thinness (Turner 1994). Coveney points out that following nutritional advice is also related to demands of being a moral and good citizen (Coveney 2006). Thus the origin of the distinction between weekday and weekend can be summarised as follows: The relationship between renunciation and reward, hedonism and asceticism, work and remuneration, provides strong clues about what type of food should be eaten when and where, and indeed what can be classified as food (Døving 2004). In such a cultural code cake is completely taboo as breakfast or everyday dinner.

Cake is thus categorised as an indulgence and associated with weekends, holidays and celebrations. However, elderly people seem to have a different relationship to cake and do not necessarily link it to the weekend. We interpret this as a sign that they have worked during their youth and adulthood and earned the right to eat cake. Old people are categorised outside of the health regime because they no longer are required to perform. Instead they can enjoy. It is as if pensioners live in their own time, with their own rules, which are parallel to the rules for weekends, celebrations and travel (Garnaas 2012). In Torsvik several of the grandparents proudly boasted that they gave their grandchildren sweets, chocolate, ice cream and cake. One grandmother said that her

grandchild called her “cake” before he could talk properly. Thus cake can be synonymous to a relationship between grandchild and grandparents, and an expression of “a joking relationship” (Radcliffe-Brown [1952]1979; Døving 2003).

Even though cakes are often bought specially ordered and decorated, or as standard from the bakery and even in frozen form in the grocery store, knowledge about baking is very extensive in our material. Unlike most other cooking which is based on adjustments, baking has to be much more precise. If you make a sauce, you can taste and adjust, if you bake a cake even experienced bakers need to weigh and measure, according to our informants in Torsvik as well as in Groruddalen. In Garnaas’ study the recipe was always followed, despite the fact that both teachers and students had made the same cake many times before. This is one of the reasons why cake recipes are important commodities.

There are several thousand different recipes. In private cookbooks you often find handwritten recipes or clippings from women’s magazines. “Can I get the recipe for this cake” is a popular sentence both for the giver and the receiver. This phrase confirms that there is always a recipe, and at the same time it is the highest form of praise that the baker of the cake can get from the receiver. Judging from the number of cake recipes on the Internet, it seems that this medium is of great use to cake bakers. If we include the English language in the cake universe, the number of online recipes and forums devoted to the art of cake baking is enormous.¹¹

Cake as a Female Contribution

Norwegian rural ethnography has identified “coffee and cake” as a conventional afternoon meal, for example in Båtsfjord (Lien 1989). This convention is also described through the enormous number of duties and chores that rural women perform (Thorsen 1994). Traditionally oriented people seem to take it for granted that women – once they have children – have cake-baking skills.

According to FÜRST (1995), administering “coffee and cake” is an important duty for women and a part of female identity and self-perception. It is very

important that there is “more than enough.” The hostess may have limited power outside the home, but in her home she is responsible for observing the conventions, and she does her utmost to ensure that Norwegian sociability survives at least another day (Døving 2003).

In the rural suburb of Torsvik serving coffee is usually the woman’s responsibility, but something men will do too if there are no women present or if the woman is busy with something else. In more public settings, the women consistently take care of coffee and cake, for example at the *dugnad* or at other public events.¹² By virtue of being hostesses they run back and forth to the kitchen and bring in more coffee and cake when there is nothing left or when it is about to run out. Providing for the guests is clearly an important value for a hostess. As one grandmother puts it:

Yes, I bake and I bake, bake so much and give away. When people would stop by on a Saturday night, for instance, it was no problem. Cause I always used to bake almond ring cake and other cakes and wheat cakes and bread and all sorts of things. I kept on baking all the time. Then I brought out a glass of canned blue plums and whipped some *eggedosis* (eggnog of whipped eggs and sugar) and almond ring cake.

The relationship between men and women in Torsvik is perceptible in the host–guest relation and the relationship with coffee and cake. On several occasions Døving was the only man in the company of several elderly women. These situations often turned into a kind of hospitality competition in the form of offering cakes. It was clearly important to them and gave them honour if he accepted cakes and ate a lot of them. During a meeting with fifteen elderly women at an old people’s home the table was laid and the coffee was ready in several thermos flasks. The anthropologist was the first to be served coffee. The cakes were also passed to him first, and everybody waited to help themselves until he was finished. The women who sat next to him encouraged him every time the cakes were passed around, and those who

sat further away made sure that the cakes were passed to “him.” On another occasion, Døving was at a meeting in a voluntary organisation where approximately thirty women between the ages of thirty and sixty were gathered. After the *dugnad* they gathered in the farmhouse to drink coffee. There was an enormous amount of cake on the small tables in the two living rooms in the house. Around half of the guests had baked for the occasion, and the selection was simply overwhelming. There were also beautiful open sandwiches. The anthropologist helped himself to open sandwiches, which he praised highly, and helped himself more modestly to some of the lighter cakes, but just like on the other occasions, the people who sat around the small table made sure that he helped himself every time a cake was passed around, and eventually he had eaten a lot more than he had intended to. Towards the end of the meeting, some people held short speeches, and the leader of the group asked if the anthropologist could tell them a little about the reasons for his presence and his mission, so he got up and did. As he sat down, there were three large pieces of cake on his plate. The women next to him were clearly proud to have made sure that he, too, got a piece when “the cakes were passed around.” It appears that the man’s role in such situations is as recipient and (bodily) consumer of female contributions.

Cake as obligatory accompaniment to coffee can also be a problem for young as well as older women in Torsvik who may feel that the demand for the achievement of cake is insatiable. As the quote below from an interview with an established housewife shows, the cakes are almost force-fed to the recipients.

Up at my place they’re not so fond of cake. I’m very fond of it, but you end up not baking so much. We eat it a lot at weekends, but it’s mostly because of mom, I think. She likes to have one. It’s holidays like Christmas and Easter. Then you force it on them (laughs). There has to be cakes.

In situations without a tape recorder they admitted that the quantity was a problem, because there was

a lot of leftovers and also because the baking could escalate into an uncontrollable potlatch (the escalating exchange rituals among the Chinooks, Mauss [1923–1924]1995). That is, the hostesses surpassed each other in baking more and bigger cakes, which they felt distracted them from more urgent tasks. In a sewing circle and in a book circle they decided not to include cakes because it got “over styr” (“out of hand,” which is the Norwegian term for potlatch) so that there was more eating and preparation of cakes than reading and sewing.

The cultural institution of coffee drinking is synonymous with an invitation in a minor social setting; here, coffee is the only obligatory contribution. Unlike the exchange of cake, coffee can hardly escalate. The obligation is to serve coffee, but nothing more (Døving 2003). Cake, on the other hand, represents a relation between participants and can more easily escalate. The cakes constitute a large part of the total contribution that women continuously make. The classic role conflict between the mother-in-law–daughter-in-law lies in the competition for control over food and the representational house (home and family). This is described in a statement by one of the informants in Tordis Borchgrevink’s study (1995): “when my husband returns from the sea, my mother-in-law always comes over with an armful of cakes.” The connotative field of “mother-in-law” can be interpreted as a power struggle for control over the son or husband. And cake is the medium through which they do battle. The consequence is an extensive female gift-giving competition that takes the form of presenting the most cakes or making the best food (Borchgrevink 1995).

“Cake Is Always Hala!”

We see that at the intersection between the taboos and rules of different traditions, the cake is the unit that makes it possible to conduct the ritual. However, if we change scenes from rural Norway to an adult education centre in one of Oslo’s suburbs, it is not as simple as a female contribution. For teachers here, the cake has been weighed and found “too heavy.” This emerges clearly from Garnaas’ study.

In 2011 Garnaas studied minority women's encounter with Norwegian ideals of health. In the adult education programme, women could choose cooking as part of their Norwegian training. The adult education programme had begun cooperating with the community volunteer centre on the floor below. The students who had chosen the cooking course made lunch for the café in the volunteer centre, which teachers, students and visitors could buy. The school's kitchen also made cakes and waffles for sale in the café. Before initiating the cooperation with the volunteer centre, no cakes were made. It was the elderly visitors to the café (who according to our interpretation have the right to eat cake on weekdays) who requested cake, a request that was met, but which also led to students eating cake on weekdays. The teachers saw this as problematic since the school had a particular emphasis on healthy eating and health, and the teachers tried to teach students the difference between weekdays and weekends, where cake belongs to the weekend, according to "the rules."¹³ Cakes flew off the shelves. The students liked Norwegian cakes. They exchanged recipes and showed greater enthusiasm for cakes than any other Norwegian food. The immigrant women thus easily internalised the popular cake-baking knowledge. A Pakistani informant stated: "We don't celebrate Norwegian Christmas like you, but the family meets and we sit and eat some Norwegian food and some other things. We must have cake."

Since the school focused on healthy eating the teachers tried to make the cake healthier by having the students experiment with reduced sugar and fat contents. Some felt that carrot cake without icing and with reduced sugar and fat was acceptable under doubt. Still, it was problematic that cake is metonymic with the unhealthy. The cake could not be accepted under the category of "healthy." "Healthy" and "cake" are a contradiction in terms (and the culinary result is poor). Since 90% of the students were Muslims, consideration of Muslim eating restrictions was also important. For the Muslim students the cake was safe food. Cakes made in the adult training programme were "always halal."¹⁴

The teachers communicated to the students that

sugar and oil should be reduced or removed in the food made in the kitchen. Food with a lot of sugar was "no-food." The teachers' power to rule over sugar was especially clear in the carnival episode, where the student with diabetes had helped herself to several pieces of cake. The teacher's act of removing the cake could be explained by her desire to rescue the student from disease or deterioration of the diabetes. The teacher assumed the role of moral instructor for the student, comparable to the relationship between mother and child. The result was that the adult student was treated like a child.¹⁵

Two different food taboos emerge with the cake: one religious and one secular. The cake's potential as "a bridge" between different cultures and religions was not utilised; the teachers' main categorisation or understanding of food was based on a Norwegian knowledge regime where the cake was placed in the unhealthy category, and therefore taboo because it violates the distinction between weekday and weekend, and because it undermines the schools' health project. The Muslim students categorised food primarily according to a knowledge regime based on Muslim eating restrictions with the categories halal/haram.¹⁶ In the school setting teachers had the power of definition. Their definition of the cake as unhealthy held sway as normal and right. The students' interest in Norwegian cakes was therefore dismissed. In other areas the teachers would probably have looked favourably at the students' interests in Norwegian food traditions, but when it came to cake, fat as taboo was more important than the transmission of food traditions.

Cake as the Lowest Common Ritual Denominator

We have looked at cake as a central part of female contributions. Children are a central receiver of this contribution, but in multicultural contexts we have several additional factors that make eating difficult and the cake pivotal.

Scott's studies of children's experiences of birthday celebrations may serve as a first example. Every third child in Oslo's primary schools has minority background, which affects the birthday celebra-

tion (Scott 2007). According to Scott, the ritual is adapted to the participants. Ethnic Norwegian children as well as parents are very conscious of food at the parties. In addition to cake the norm is to have sausages, pizza, jelly and a bag of sweets. They can easily serve vegetarian pizza or turkey sausages to Moslem children, and some even buy halal meat for the parties. Families from Pakistan who adopt the Norwegian celebration often serve pizza and traditional Pakistani food.¹⁷ In other words, the birthday party culture is not completely rigid, and can at least be adjusted in each category. Even if the individual components of the birthday celebration can be adapted and changed, presents and cake with candles function as the lowest common ritual denominator required at a birthday celebration (Scott 2007).

However, there are specific ideas of what sort of cake should be served at a birthday party. For most parents the “proper birthday cake” is a layered cream cake like the one they were used to when they grew up. At today’s birthday parties the layered cream cake seems to have yielded to the chocolate cake. Chocolate cake is what most children prefer and eat the most of. Some parents feel that this is wrong, and they make a layered cream cake in addition to the chocolate cake even if the children do not eat it. Scott interprets this as a sign that for these parents a component is missing in the ritual without the layered cream cake. Among ethnic Norwegian parents there exists an ideal of the good old-fashioned birthday party as the “proper birthday celebration,” as opposed to for example birthdays celebrated at McDonalds. The birthday celebration becomes a compulsory exercise with a specific repertoire in a typically ritual sense. Scott sees a difference in Moslem parents who do not have similar birthday experiences from their childhood and therefore have not internalised them as a duty (Scott 2007).

Scott thus found that the birthday ritual could be adapted to a multicultural reality where some children had to have halal food (Scott 2007). Such an adaptation does not necessarily develop without complications. Ingvild Endestad, one of the anthropologists who answered our questionnaire, did her fieldwork among seventh graders in a school in

Groruddalen. She witnessed an episode where the teachers discussed what they would serve at a school party. Several teachers protested loudly against pizza and sausages. There was really no food they could serve, because everyone in their class had problems with food, related to religion or allergies. Some felt that it would be completely impossible to serve food in school. The discussion ended with the conclusion that they had no other option than serving chocolate cake at the party. They agreed that at least no one could have problems with that. In this connection cake functioned as a neutral food which could be served across cultures.¹⁸

Thus far we have looked at the cake’s place in the food grammar, where the cake has designated spheres that regulate the intake. We have also observed the cake as a female contribution in rural Norway, where it is appropriated among immigrant women and has become a common denominator in multicultural children’s birthday parties. But the cake also has a controversial place in the social hierarchy, which gives us insight into why and how fat is to be governed.

The Cake in the Sociological Hierarchy

Based on our observations and interviews with colleagues, cake seems to have the strongest standing in rural areas. Rural and urban areas seem like different universes when it comes to cake. There are more expectations to home baking and quantity in rural areas. Thus the cake represents a distinction between city and countryside as well as between social classes.

In a department of the Faculty of Social Sciences the cake was typically central to the Norwegian end-of-the-week celebrations. There were alphabetic lists that showed whose turn it was to make cake, compiled by one of the female co-workers in the administration. This cake list was distributed, corrected and then posted on a cupboard door by the dishwasher next to the centrally placed coffee machine.

This faculty had a technical and a social science department in addition to the administration. At the institution there was a partly self-ironic conception of the expectations associated with the cakes. When

someone in the administration or the technical staff was responsible for the cake, it was homemade and advanced, whereas when someone from the social science department was due, there was systematically Danish pastry from the local baker, which was called “social science cake.” When asked directly, women in the social science department stated that cake was something one should not make, which we interpret as saying: “I don’t know how to bake, I don’t want to learn, and I am proud of not knowing how.” We interpret this attitude as a very strong act of distancing oneself from the housewife’s traditional and expected contributions.

Stene-Jonassen, one of the anthropologists who answered our questionnaire, conducted fieldwork in different companies and in a competence-building measure for managers, which is a typical educational setting. There was a conspicuous lack of cake. She cannot remember a single time when cake was served or eaten during her fieldwork. Her interpretation is that managers belong to a hierarchical level where values such as healthy eating and health through bodily control has a strong standing, and what is therefore served when managers meet is water/mineral water, coffee, tea and fruit. On some occasions they met for a “good dinner” with the associated “good wine,” but in such a setting the meal was often without dessert.

From a class perspective the cake thus represents a female contribution which middle-class women should distance themselves from. Not bringing a cake to the *dugnad*, the Friday afternoon get-together or confirmation seems to be markedly class specific. It seems as if women communicate massive non-communication when they show off or do not show off cake-making skills. The communication runs approximately as follows: “I don’t understand what you’re doing, and I don’t want to understand it either, so let’s leave it at that.” According to Lien, Lidén and Vike (2001) this incommensurable communication is typical for Norway, which has a very strained relationship to class, accompanied by a strong egalitarian ideology.¹⁹ A stratified society which at the same time postulates equality, necessarily runs into problems when such obvious contradictions reach opinion.

In some groups in society the focus on health permeates lifestyles and thought patterns. Lindis Sloan, who answered our questionnaire, studied female students in Oslo and placed their thoughts on food and body in a cultural context. She found clear traces of ideas and statements that would qualify for psychiatric diagnoses such as eating disorders if it had not been for the fact that all the informants’ weights were in the normal range and their BMI well within the norm. Sloan interprets the informants’ thoughts as orthorexia. They displayed some food-avoidance principles that may seem silly or completely arbitrary, but which for them were firmly based on science. They ate healthily, balanced, five-a-day (the recommended number of fruit and vegetables a day according to the Norwegian Ministry of Health) and not in excess. Orthorexia tendencies were evident in the many exceptions. One of the few times Sloan met her informants outside the university was in a café in central Oslo. The central topic for the discussion was a chocolate cake with chocolate cream and tutti frutti icing candy. There were five people around the table, and everyone bought the same cake and different drinks. The cakes were cut by hand, and therefore some pieces were larger or smaller than others. One of the informants exclaimed: “This reminds me of when my brother and I were little. We always fought to get the biggest piece. Now we argue over who will have the smallest!”

They point out this change without reflecting on why their focus on health has changed their view on cake. What they do reflect on, is how things that are not permitted in one context become permitted as soon as they are together with others, and how comparisons with others justify their own calorie intake. Cake, then, is eaten in typically Norwegian contexts, but with reference to a completely different discourse. Even these students eat “a little” cake when it is expected in a situation. The expectation to indulge oneself with cake in the company of others outweighs the health discourse.

Cake seems, in other words, to be very complicated for the academic middle class. From an anti-housewife perspective one is not supposed to bake cakes, and from a weight perspective one should not

eat it. Yet in some social settings one should eat it. In addition one must control other people's cake. For most people in rural areas it is admittedly regulated by the weekday–weekend dichotomy, but the cake is first and foremost a proud contribution. This contribution can also be repressive.

The Conflict over the Home-Made Cake

In the essay “Kake eller konfekt” (“Cake or confectionary”) Sørhaug (1996) analyses *dugnad* in voluntary organisations and relates this to the demand for homemade cakes in connection with cake raffles. As a father of children in the school band Sørhaug has personal experiences with *dugnad*. The cake raffles in the local shopping centre is emphasised as a particularly interesting example to highlight the kind of effort that is required of parents. By giving a homemade cake the parents show that they invest time in the school band. Buying boxes of confectionary is marginally acceptable, but indicates investing less time and effort in the school band than parents who contribute with homemade cakes. The quality of the chocolate is therefore important. If you do not have time to bake, you should at least buy expensive chocolates. The quality of the homemade cake is not judged in the same way. The times when Sørhaug's family brought chocolate he was the one who had to deliver it, because as a man he was more easily excused for not baking. For the mother not to bake was almost the same as being a bad mother. Bringing cakes bought at the supermarket to the cake raffles was totally unacceptable and was looked upon as buying yourself free from your commitments (Sørhaug 1996).

Elisabeth Fossli Olsen, who answered our questionnaire, has the same experience. In connection with a *dugnad* to raise money for a trip for eighth graders the parents got a letter saying that they had to make contributions in the form of a homemade cake. The word “homemade” was written in bold letters.²⁰ Sørhaug links the emphasis on “homemadeness” and time use to Frederik Barth's ([1967]1994) theory of economic spheres. There are specific conversion possibilities and conversion barriers between the spheres “work,” “cake,” “money” and

“school band.” Sørhaug argues that the time spent directly on the school band is considered to be most valuable, not money in itself. There is thus an important conversion barrier between time and money. He suggests three types of school-band parents based on their efforts for the school band: the elite, the middle section and the free rider. The different categories are associated with moral gains. The elite invest the most time and emphasise socialising and team spirit in the time they spend, not necessarily efficiency. The middle section participate in the *dugnad*, but never manage to do as much as the elite. They are therefore morally inferior. The free riders do not show up for *dugnad* and are therefore morally bankrupt. When someone has skipped a few *dugnad* sessions it is very difficult to show one's face again. Parents who spend little time on the school band are contrasted with those who spend a lot of time, but it is not possible to pay back with money, only by investing more time (Sørhaug 1996). The time invested is in other words most visible in the homemade cake.

The Return of the Cake

The modernist projection paradigm expects change. One of the classic narratives about this change is gender equality in the home – in the sense that the man and the woman will do the same work (Døving 2003). One assumption that appears in this debate is that instant cake mix will win over the cake-baking knowledge and, indirectly, that the skill of cake baking will disappear. If we look at this empirically we do not find this change except in the discourse around it.²¹ The women who dissociate themselves from baking seem to belong to an academic middle class where the rebellion against the “1950s housewife” is central. The new interest in baking seems particularly evident in the cupcake trend. Only in the last two years 13 books on cupcake baking have been published in Norwegian. In Bergen a special muffins and cupcakes café has opened. Bloggers across the country post photos of their freshly baked cupcakes. There is also great demand for and several providers of American baking courses, and cupcake courses, according to our informant in the business, are the most popular. The interpretation

of this trend in the public debate is within a politicised feminist discourse. In the essay “Den nye husmorskolen” (“The new school of domestic science”), author and journalist Martha Breen deals a blow to cupcakes and those who bake them. She thinks the essence of the trend is the baking of the cake, not the eating of it, because eating the cake does not square with the low-carb trend (Breen 2011). Eirin Eikefjord, journalist in the newspaper *Bergens Tidene*, writes:

It is in other words not about quick carbohydrates and sugar craving. In that case one might as well have a raisin bun and half a litre of coke. No, the cupcake is the sophisticated indulgence. And in the same way as the romanticizing of domestic life, it is about the perfect façade. (Eikefjord 2011, our translation)

Cupcakes are primarily aesthetic. They are small, cute and nice to look at. Eikefjord and Breen also think that they represent the perfect façade: It is the aesthetics and the representation of perfection that are important. They do not necessarily have to be eaten. Breen sees the American baking trend in a nostalgic-chronological perspective and associates it with what she calls the “housewife wave,” where educated women choose to “return to the home” in order to have time for baking and children. Breen casts a concerned look at women with an MA degree who, after a few years, “prioritise” staying at home in order to create the perfect home.

It is possible to interpret this trend in a context where the new generation rebels against the anti-housewife ideal of the “1960s counterculture generation.” However, there is much to suggest that this is mainly about the problems of the middle class. It is (still) different in rural areas: in 2008 Erlend Ketilson Stuve carried out fieldwork on masculinity and food in northern Norway in the fishing community of Vestvågøy in Lofoten, a small village with around a thousand inhabitants. He wanted to study the production, distribution and consumption of food as an approach to discuss gender. One of his informants provided the following conclusion: “It’s quite simple,

really, the men work outside, the women make the food” – and the same thought had occurred to the anthropologist (Stuve 2009). In our interpretation class is systematically misconstrued as a teleological conception of change where cake no longer will be baked. When the great media discourse is played out, the journalist’s interpretation of the findings that women bake cakes is translated to the idea that women “‘still’ bake cakes,” that is with a modernist ad-hoc hypothesis of “still,” as if they will stop doing it (Døving 2003). The point is that the main hypothesis is retained; the world is changing in a particular direction and people will stop making cakes, even if there is no empirical evidence to support the hypothesis. Then an ad-hoc hypothesis is proposed to save the main hypothesis.

Conclusion

Eating the cake that is served is a duty, yet in a health context the cake is taboo outside of certain ritual settings. In our interpretation, the duty to bake (especially for women) is not something that belongs in the past. Parents are expected to bake in connection with *dugnad*, children’s leisure activities, school events and birthday celebrations. In rural areas cake baking has a central place as part of women’s duties and contributions, and at the same time it gives women power. Middle-class women seem to resist the expectations of cake baking by consciously communicating that they do not know how to bake and do not want to learn. In a social hierarchy cake baking is a popular cultural matter-of-course. The professional middle-class woman does not want to participate in this female competitive discipline, but is subordinate in this relation.

In the multicultural Norwegian cake has the potential to be a bridge-builder between different cultures due to its harmless character as *halal*. Immigrant women adopt the Norwegian cake recipes partly because of food taboos, but probably also with a natural closeness to Norwegian popular culture. But in a Norwegian context where health seems to get more focus than religion this potential is overlooked. Immigrant women are confronted with a dominant and superior Norwegian health discourse, and a ma-

ternalistic relation emerges which gives the right to intervene. In this situation the power is transferred from the woman as baker to ethnic Norwegian teachers who manage the Norwegian health regime.

Notes

- 1 “Dugnad” is a characteristic Norwegian phenomenon where people in a community, a neighbourhood or parents in a school or a kindergarten etc. meet to do some required work without payment, such as spring cleaning, painting etc.
- 2 The cake questionnaire was distributed to 20 anthropologists who have done fieldwork in Norway. We received 6 replies. The questions we posed were: Tell us about a special and/or a typical situation where cake was prominent. When and where did they eat cake in general? Why did they say that they ate cake? How did they discuss cake? The anthropologists interviewed are: Ingvild Endestad, Elisabeth Fosli Olsen, Lindis Sloan, Maria Stene-Jonassen, Erlend Ketilson Stuve.
- 3 In Norway there must traditionally be seven kinds of cake for Christmas. The ingredients in the seven kinds are often the same, but preparation and decoration make them different. The cakes are put in boxes and saved for Christmas Eve. Then, it is a matter of eating them all before Christmas is over.
- 4 Law May 19, 1933, no. 11 on excise duties. Changed Nov. 9, 1990, no. 899, May 30, 1997, no. 539, March 27, 1998, no. 274, Nov. 24, 1998, no. 1088, June 18, 2001, no. 696.
- 5 Prop. 1 LS (2011–2012), Tax, excise and custom duties 2012: 4.19 Taxes on chocolate and sugar confectionary etc. (chapter 5555 post 70). Tax liability covers sugar confectionary, including white chocolate, chewing gum, caramels, lozenges, candy and hard candy.
- 6 The 17th of May is the Norwegian Constitution Day. A central element in the celebrations is the children’s parade. There is a tradition for eating great amounts of sausages, ice cream and cake on this day.
- 7 VG, downloaded on May 12, 1995.
- 8 “kake” + “samvittighet” (i.e. ”cake” + ”conscience”) gives over 100,000 hits on Google, February 2013.
- 9 “The Saturday night treat” is the prescribed time sphere for the consumption of sweets for Norwegian children (Bugge & Døving 2000). The Friday night “after work beer” is a very common collegial celebration of the weekend among Norwegian workers. The consumption takes place at a bar or an outdoor restaurant after work.
- 10 Weber writes that the Christian puritan ethic allows the accumulation of wealth through hard work, but at the same time it requires frugality on the personal level (Weber 1995). According to Protestant duty ethics you should do your duty in the World to please God. The duty ethic states that we should do our duty, regardless of consequences and our own wishes. Our actions are judged by the degree to which they match the standards set by the authority (Martinsen 1991), and for Protestants this authority is God. According to Bell (1979) the Protestant ethic has contributed to limiting people’s consumption. Normative practices around food remain, but have shifted from a basis in Christian ethics to medical and scientific discourses (Foucault quoted in Coveney 2006: 43).
- 11 A search on Google for “kakeoppskrifter” (“cake recipes” in Norwegian) gives 12,000 hits. A search for “kake” and “oppskrift” gives 186,000. A similar search in English gives almost 40 million hits.
- 12 In Norway, where gender equality is quite extensive, and many men do much of the care work and an increasing share of household chores, baking is extremely gendered (also in the middle class).
- 13 The students had workouts twice a week as part of the mandatory teaching and also teaching on nutrition and other health questions one hour a week.
- 14 The students were concerned about the safety of other kinds of food and often asked if the food was halal, despite the fact that the kitchen always made halal food.
- 15 The students developed strategies for handling the teachers’ rules. These resistance strategies were played out in secret, what Scott calls “hidden transcripts” (Scott 1990). It could be adding more oil in the food when the teachers were not around, or doing the opposite of what the teachers had encouraged. They might also laugh among themselves at the massive focus on healthy eating.
- 16 There are some exceptions. Some cakes are sprinkled with alcohol, which is problematic for Muslims who want to heed the Muslim alcohol prohibition. Some cakes also contain gelatine, which is not halal. Such cakes were not made at the adult education programme. It seemed, however, as if the cake was categorically halal, and that they did not question its specific contents in more detail.
- 17 According to Scott, Pakistani mothers were also used to cakes with candles for birthday celebrations, but it was common to order the cake. They had learnt from their home country that cakes come from the bakery. Scott saw that the Pakistani women had adapted to the Norwegian conventions and baked the cakes themselves.
- 18 In other connections, such as at the year-end celebration, children brought food which they shared with others. In such settings there was never a discussion of who would bring what, and our colleague never heard the pupils complain. She interpreted this as a sign that food brought from home is probably safer in such a setting, because then no one is offended.

- 19 This attitude towards cake is probably a central reason why the cake has not been more analysed. What is common seems to have low status in Norwegian social science research. Fields such as housework, textiles, washing and cleanliness, which are typically female chores, are poorly studied.
- 20 The informant reacted immediately and wanted actively to defy the instruction. She considered bringing a cake from Pascal (which is one of Oslo's most exclusive pastry shops). The reaction is typically schismogenetic in that she offered competing services.
- 21 The ingredients change, but the rule stays the same. This is also the case when it comes to dinner. It should be "homemade" or "from scratch," but what is categorised as homemade is constantly in flux (Bugge & Døving 2000). The amount of contribution required to satisfy the norm is thus a cultural negotiation (over time).

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