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Ribbon Pulls in Wedding Cakes: Tracing a New Orleans Tradition

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Abstract

The ritual of cutting the wedding cake at weddings in the New Orleans area is preceded by another ritual tradition: unmarried female friends of the bride each "pull a ribbon," to which a silver charm or "favour" is attached, from the cake. Charms can include a ring, a heart, a thimble, a button, a horseshoe, and a clover, each with a traditional meaning. An exploration of the possible derivations and routes of diffusion of this custom reveal that it has much more complex origins and meanings than is commonly assumed by most New Orleanians.

Introduction

The wedding cake—extraordinary and familiar, ritual symbol and dessert, a work of culinary art to be admired, and a food to be eaten—defies simple description or easy explanation. In his Foreword to Simon R. Charsley's *Wedding Cakes and Cultural History,* William Woys Weaver writes:

> ... the Great Cake and its layers upon layers of sublimated meanings—erotic to commemorative—are certainly here to stay. It is a food that has become a veritable institution. A wedding without it would be a wedding without protocol, a rite without confirmation (Weaver 1992).

Mary Douglas has also called attention to "the ceremonial surrounding the cutting and distribution of the wedding cake" (Douglas 1982, 105). At weddings in the New Orleans area, the ceremony of cutting the wedding cake is preceded by another ritual—pulling ribbons from the cake. I will explore some of the possible origins, routes of diffusion, and meanings of this custom, as well as its continuing popularity in a relatively small area of south Louisiana radiating from New Orleans. "Pulling a ribbon" is one of many wedding rituals in the New Orleans area that add a special sense of place and setting to the wedding, apart from being a well-known tradition that is meaningful for family and friends who come together to joyfully celebrate a marriage. [1]

Wedding cakes in the New Orleans area come with ribbons embedded in the icing. At the wedding reception, unmarried female friends of the bride are invited to "pull a ribbon." A silver charm or "favour" hidden in the bottom layer of the cake is attached to each ribbon. Typically, each woman or young girl holds on to a ribbon as a photograph is taken, and then all "pull" simultaneously on cue.

Charms include a ring, a heart, a thimble, a button, a horseshoe, a clover—and sometimes a fleur-de-lis—an anchor, a dime, and also a penny. Each has a

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traditional meaning—the ring means "next to marry," the heart means "true love," the thimble or button means "old maid," the horseshoe or the clover means "good luck," the fleur-de-lis means "love will bloom," the anchor means "hope," the dime means "wealth," and the penny means "poverty." This event gets the attention of all the guests, and the moment of the pulling is followed by good wishes or teasing depending on which item a person pulls.

This tradition has been a part of wedding receptions in New Orleans itself, and in an area within about a fifty-mile radius of the city, including the adjacent river parishes (i.e. the parishes divided by the Mississippi River), for at least seventy-five years and probably much longer—according to dated memorabilia and personal narratives. The earliest wedding cake with ribbon pulls that I have been able to document was that of my mother, whose wedding took place at Evergreen Plantation near New Orleans, in 1928. One of my aunts, Olivia Gendron (now aged ninety-two years), has the white ribbon in her "Memory Book," and written next to it is the comment, "Ribbon pulled from Boos's wedding cake"—Boos being my mother's nickname. The silver charm—a thimble—is no longer there, but she remembers that it was prophetic for her as she never married. Another aunt, Marguerite Hingle

Figure 1. Ribbon pulling at a New Orleans wedding in 1984.

(now aged ninety-four years), also recalls pulling a ribbon in my mother's wedding cake and remembers that she got the button; she did, however, marry a few years later. Both aunts described in detail the wedding, the cake, and the ritual of pulling the ribbons. They also did not think that it was unusual to have ribbons in the cake at that time as their own mother and grandmother always understood that ribbons were part of the wedding cake, and that only the unmarried girls present at the wedding could pull them.

Since the 1950s, the ribbon-pulling ritual has been considered an important photograph moment during a wedding reception, one that provides a requisite photograph for the wedding album (see Figure 1). In my own family's photograph collections, for example, there are photographs of ribbon pulls at the weddings of at least four generations of brides.

The ribbon-pulls tradition in New Orleans and vicinity is not restricted to any religious or ethnic group. It is a city and area-wide tradition. Dianne Gaines, a New Orleans native, graduate of Xavier University, and wife of Louisiana writer Ernest Gaines, said that everyone she knew in the Creole and African American communities in New Orleans had ribbons in their wedding cakes in the 1950s and 1960s. This custom continues among these ethnic groups to the present day. [2]

Pulling a ribbon from the wedding cake is considered an honour—a sign of friendship or of close family ties to the bride. But there is also the possibility of offending people unless the recognised protocol concerning who gets asked to "pull" is observed. All unmarried bridesmaids pull a ribbon, and then young unmarried female relatives (sisters and cousins) of the bride and/or groom, as well as friends of the bride, are usually invited to "pull."

Usually the maid of honour will have the job of asking girls to "pull" after conferring with the bride. Sometimes the bride tells young women before the wedding that she would like them to "pull a ribbon." Where one stands in relation to where the wedding cake is placed is also important, since a popular belief is that the ring is usually on the ribbon to the right of the bride—often the position of the maid of honour.

The ribbon pulling precedes the cutting of the cake and it is performed in the absence of the groom. The bride is surrounded by young, unmarried women; the bridesmaids, and the friends, sisters, or cousins of the bride, gather round the cake while the bride stands right behind it. She is in command, and she usually makes sure that everyone is holding a ribbon. Then she gives the command to "pull."

After the ribbons are pulled and everyone has licked the icing off of the charm and ribbon to identify the attached charm (usually followed by hugs and laughter and/or commiseration), the groom joins the bride to perform the ceremonial cutting of the cake—which usually consists of simply making the first slice into the cake. The caterer or someone else appointed to the task does the actual cutting up of the cake into slices for distribution to the guests.

Variants of the tradition, which emphasise the importance of the ring in the custom, have also developed. In the early 1960s, my uncle asked the bakery to put a ring on every ribbon in my cousin's wedding cake, as he wished to avoid disappointing anyone. At the wedding of one of my nieces, however, the bakery failed to include a ring on any of the ribbons—a mistake not easily forgiven by

those present who were determined to pull the ring. In 1999, a bride in her mid-thirties with all of her sisters and friends already married, arranged that her young nieces, aged from five to seventeen years, should pull the ribbons instead of the usual single marriageable women.

The custom of ribbon pulling at weddings is generally believed in New Orleans to be of French or French Creole origin, and many of the bakeries in the New Orleans area believe it to be a uniquely New Orleans custom—although it is not unknown in other parts. The kinds of charms used are available on several Internet sites, all of which describe this as a Victorian custom. [3] Jannice Moecklin, owner of the business "Swiss Confectionery" in New Orleans, said in an article "The Ribbon Pulls," in *New Orleans Magazine* in 1998: "This is an old custom brought over from France. To the Creoles of New Orleans, this was an exciting part of the wedding event, and has continued to the present time." She also said that, in the past, silver trinkets were baked *in* the wedding cake and that the custom of ribbon pulls seems to pertain only to the New Orleans area. Miss Lotus, who has been in charge of wedding cakes at Gambino's bakery for fifty years, concurs. Although they order their sterling silver "wedding pulls" (the only kind Gambino's uses) from New York, she maintains that New Orleans is the only place she knows of that has this tradition. She also said that even people who had moved away try to continue the custom and often get someone from New Orleans to call to Gambino's to get the charms so that they can put them in their wedding cakes.

Although it is commonly assumed in New Orleans that ribbon pulls in wedding cakes are a French tradition, I have found no evidence to date to suggest that it was ever a custom in France. It is not mentioned by Van Gennep in his encyclopaedic study of French folklore and traditions, which includes an extensive survey of wedding and marriage traditions throughout France. Although van Gennep talks about the presentation of the wedding cake, and says that in many places an enormous cake, *le gâteau de noces*, is carried in by a strong young man who raises it above his head and dances it around the tables, as part of a ritual called *danser les gateaux*, no ribbons or charms are mentioned (Van Gennep 1946, vol. 2, 513–26). There is also no mention of this tradition in Simon Charsley's (1992) *Wedding Cakes and Cultural History.*

Referring to Cajun weddings at the turn of the twentieth century, the late-nineteenth-century Breaux Manuscript on Acadian folklife states:

> As dessert, a huge wedding cake is carried in. It can take various shapes, but most usually it resembles the steeple of a church or the tower of Babel, ornamented with garlands, sugar flowers of various colors, and is topped with a bouquet of real flowers. It is divided into slices on a vast tray and the slices are offered to each guest. Some are sent to people who could not attend the feast (Ditchy 1966, 41–2).

There is no mention here of ribbons or charms. It would appear that ribbon pulls are not French at all, but were probably brought to the area by *les Americains*—the English, Scottish, or Irish immigrants who spoke English and who came to New Orleans from other areas of the United States, or who emigrated directly from their home countries to New Orleans. The city itself, of course, is not truly French either—despite the French Quarter and the French

street names. The influence of Spanish, African American, Scottish, Irish, and later Italian immigrants, is arguably as significant as that of the French.

The New Orleans tradition of ribbon pulls in wedding cakes is related to various other customs with European roots, such as putting tokens or talismans in festival foods and celebration cakes. These include the practice of putting a baby or a bean in a Twelfth Night Cake or King Cake. In New Orleans, the King Cake, as it is usually called today, is a sweet yeast-bread shaped to form a crown and usually decorated with the traditional Mardi Gras colours using gold, purple, and green sugars. A bean or a small china doll was traditionally baked in the cake, but today a small plastic baby is usually hidden in the cake instead. The person who gets the bean or the baby in a piece of cake is king (or queen) for a week and is expected to provide the next King Cake for the group the following week, and so on until Mardi Gras. This tradition is still extremely popular in Louisiana during the Mardi Gras season, and one that was indeed brought there by the French (Gaudet 1989, 114–21; Henisch 2003, 579–80). Others are the English Christmas custom of putting silver charms in puddings, and the Irish Hallowe'en tradition of including some similar charms in cakes and tarts for divination purposes. In *All Silver and No Brass*, Henry Glassie observes in relation to county Fermanagh, Northern Ireland, that:

> On Hallow Eve, girls engaged in light-hearted divination. Fruit cakes, called "bracks," are still made for Hallowe'en with a ring baked into them. The girl whose slice includes the ring can expect to be married within the year (Glassie 1975, 115).

Jack Santino also mentions the inclusion of talismans in tarts and pies for Hallowe'en divination purposes in Northern Ireland. Such charms usually consist of a ring to betoken marriage, a button batchelorhood, sixpence wealth, and other trinkets with various meanings (Santino 1998, 123–6). He also reports on other divination charms and practices in Ireland, including the use of plates for divinatory purposes on Hallowe'en. Four plates are put on a table each containing divinatory charms—rosary beads to betoken that the girl who chooses it will become a nun, another with a ring to indicate marriage, one with nothing or water to signifying the prospect of being an old maid, and one with clay to intimate death (Santino 1998, 122–3; see also Lysaght 2001, 193–4). The latter talisman is a central motif in James Joyce's short story "Clay" in *The Dubliners* (Joyce 1966, 112). Santino also points out that Hallowe'en divination customs in Northern Ireland are typically playful traditions, and that they are generally the domain of women (Santino 1998, 119), much like the wedding cake ribbons and charms in New Orleans and surrounding area

Having ribbon pulls in wedding cakes is more specifically and more closely related, however, to a tradition Simon Charsley regards as being "distinctively Scottish," and a custom that continues to be popular in Glasgow to this day (Charsley 1987, 98–101; 1992, 12–13). According to Charsley, Scottish wedding cakes have inedible ornaments (often with ribbons attached) called favours on the cake, which are removed when the cake is cut and given by the bride and bridesmaids to the women guests (Charsley 1992, 12). In England, favours were once lightly tacked to the dress of the bride and pulled off by the bridesmaids: "In the seventeenth century favours were usually knots of ribbon which were

distributed to those whom it was desired to associate with the wedding and to honour" (Charsley 1992, 97). Favours were later moved from the dress to the cake. This practice died out in England but reappeared in Scotland in the twentieth century on the bride's cake (Charsley 1992, 97).

The British wedding cake, now a typically dark, rich fruitcake with white icing, is apparently derived from elements dating originally from medieval and early modern times. The form as we know it, however, seems to have developed in the Victorian period (Charsley 1988, 237; 1992, 82), when the cake, an elaborate structure with a tendency to rise into tiers, became an important part of the wedding celebration. The earliest recipe, dating from 1665, for a baked wedding confectionery recorded from Britain is for a wedding pie (Charsley 1992, 47–8). In the early 1800s, the bride's pie was still a principal dish at a wedding dinner (Charsley 1992, 45–7). A ring was baked in the pie, and the lady who got the ring would be thought to be the next bride (Charsley 1992, 48–9).

The custom of including a ring and a sixpence in a cake served at a wedding is known from the late nineteenth century in England and Scotland. W. T. Marchant, writing in 1879, offered the following instructions:

> Make a common flat cake of flour, water, currants, etc.; put therein a wedding ring and a sixpence. When the company is about to retire on the wedding-day, the cake must be broken and distributed amongst the unmarried females. She who gets the ring in her portion of the cake will shortly be married; and the one who gets the sixpence will die an old maid (Marchant 1879, 21, quoted in Charsley 1992, 110).

It is probable that the New Orleans tradition evolved from both the custom of favours *on* the wedding cake and the custom of baking a ring and sixpence *in* the cake—customs probably brought by nineteenth-century Scottish and Irish immigrants to New Orleans, as well as school teachers who came from England and Scotland. [4] McKenzie's Bakery, established in 1924 by a Scottish immigrant (Henry C. "Mack" McKenzie) that, by 2001, with its forty-nine pastry shops, had developed into the largest bakery chain in the area, is also likely to have been a significant influence on the practice of ribbon pulls in wedding cakes in the New Orleans area. When the shops were closed for two months in the summer of 2000 by the Board of Health because of health code violations, the news made headlines such as "Mourning McKenzie's," "Traditions Under Assault," "We're Losing Pieces of Our Culture" in the New Orleans *Times-Picayune*, and prompted many letters to the newspaper about the loss of New Orleans traditions. Even the editorial page joined in, stating:

> In a place where food is far more than a biological necessity and traditions are deeply cherished, it's not surprising that the demise of a local bakery chain has people in a funk (*Times-Picayune*, 18 and 19 May, 2000).

McKenzie's re-opened under new ownership in the late summer of 2000, but was permanently closed in 2001. There is also some evidence that the charms in New Orleans wedding cakes, like those in Scotland and Northern England, were earlier baked *in* the cakes ("The Ribbon Pulls," *New Orleans Magazine* 1998, 11).

Arnold van Gennep, in his *Manuel de Folklore Français Contemporain*, stresses local inventiveness and variability as important elements in contemporary French folklore. The power of example should be added to this. A local tradition becomes a model to be followed by others who attend or hear about it. The tradition of ribbon pulls in wedding cakes, as it has evolved in New Orleans, appears to be the result of local inventiveness and the influence of example. This fascination with finding a token or "prize" in a cake may also be reinforced by the New Orleanians' delight in finding the baby in the King Cake, as already mentioned. While still in operation, McKenzie's Bakery alone baked over thirty thousand King Cakes a week during Mardi Gras season. [5] The power of example and local tradition is also apparent in the St Patrick's Day parade in New Orleans where spectators along the parade route—accustomed to begging "throw me something, mister" at Mardi Gras parades—are thrown cabbages and Irish potatoes as well as green beads and other green things.

Why do brides in the New Orleans area still have ribbon pulls in their wedding cakes, and why is a photograph of the ribbon-pulling event considered necessary for the wedding album? There are, no doubt, many reasons for this, including its role in the complex of wedding rituals that affirm marriage as an occasion for family and community celebration. Like the favours in Scotland, pulling a ribbon in the wedding cake is considered an honour, and the charm is a memento to be associated with the wedding. As Charsley points out in relation to the giving of favours at Glasgow weddings, the ribbon pulls could "be appropriately identified as a recognition of relationships, one small element in the elaborate chain of a socially significant exchange which surrounds this way of marrying" (Charsley 1987, 102).

Ribbon pulling is not something that is done only once in one's lifetime. Most young women in the New Orleans area, unless they marry very young, are likely to have pulled many ribbons from wedding cakes. Denese Lea, now in her forties, who grew up in New Orleans, said, "The highlight for me at the reception was the 'ribbon pull.' I wanted what was on the end of that ribbon."

Linda Dégh has noted that the modern media represent marriage as the goal of media "princesses," television and movie stars, as well as real princesses. In *American Folklore and the Media*, Dégh says, "The principal goal of modern heroines is marriage. The wedding is presented as a landmark of Märchen fulfillment no matter how many times the star has previously married" (Dégh 1994, 106). The popularity of ribbon pulls also seems to mirror this, but some changes in the ritual also reflect the outlook of the contemporary woman. While the ribbon with the ring attached still seems to be regarded the "prize pull" in the cake, more contemporary charms are appearing, such as a rocking horse betokening a baby, a jet plane representing travel and adventure, and a sand dollar betokening wealth. At some recent weddings, married friends were asked to pull a ribbon, and King Cake babies were put on some of the ribbons as a divination game to see who would have the next baby! New meanings are also being given to "old" traditional charms, and nowadays the thimble and scissors are said to mean "independence," or "a positive choice," rather than having any connotations of being an "old maid."

Ribbon pulling is still a vital wedding tradition in the New Orleans area. It has changed to reflect the times. In the early 1960s, when we all pulled a ring in my cousin's wedding cake, everyone was happy. Today, there are more choices for young women, and the ribbon pulls reflect this. Another sign of the times is the popularity of ribbon pulling charms on Internet websites, and in e-stores, such as ultimatewedding.com, bridesvillage.com, letthemeatcake.com, silverfantasy.com, weddingsforless.com, and so on. Here the Victorian origins of the talismans are explained, and the charms' meanings are included on an instruction card. It is also suggested that the bride may wish to give such details at the bridesmaid luncheon or at the rehearsal dinner. With the "Click here to order!" ease of the Internet, local innovation as well as the power of example, may lead to new directions for folklore study.

Notes

[1] Another example of New Orleans area wedding rituals is the "second line." The term originally applied to the non-official members of a procession such as a jazz funeral, and its origins are clearly Afro-Creole. It also can apply to the distinctive rhythm of jazz music and the parading style of the followers of the jazz musicians. Once mainly associated with Afro-Creole culture, second lining is now a popular part of New Orleans area weddings, regardless of ethnicity. Typically a jazz trio leads the bridal couple who are followed by their guests as they parade around the reception area, waving decorated umbrellas and souvenir napkins. For more information on second lining, see Regis (1999).

[2] A photograph of an African American wedding in the New Orleans *Times-Picayune* bridal tabloid, January 2004, had the caption: "[The bride] chose a traditional New Orleans wedding with all the trimmings." The photograph shows the bride with her seven bridesmaids each holding a ribbon from the cake, and it does not give any explanation of the photograph or the context. The ribbon pull in wedding cakes is such a typical tradition in New Orleans that the assumption is that it needs no further comment (*Times-Picayune*, Sunday 18 January 2004, *The Wedding Book* Supplement, 3).

[3] The only printed references I found that attributed the New Orleans custom to Victorian origins were in *New Orleans Magazine*, vol. 37 (June 2003): 9. In "Julia Street with Poydras the Parrot: A monthly Pursuit of Answers to Eternal Questions," Julia responds to a question from Orlando, Florida, about the "custom of the satin pulls on wedding cakes" in New Orleans:

> The tradition is said to date back to Victorian England and is not unique to this area. Little silver charms on ribbons are baked or otherwise inserted into a cake. Bridesmaids tug on the ribbons to free the charms and keep them as mementos. There seem to be no hard and fast rules for the custom. In recent years, it has been practiced at most any celebration requiring a fancy cake and involving people who like to play with their food. You should find cake pulls at any shop selling wedding favors. Details surrounding their usage should be easy to find in wedding guides, but instructions often come with the charms.

[4] For example, the Gleason and Picard Institute in New Orleans was founded in 1880 by Mary C. Markey and other teachers who began their careers in England, teaching court etiquette to young women ("Julia Street with Poydras the Parrot," *New Orleans Magazine*, vol. 34 [July 2000]: 8).

[5] For more on New Orleans King Cake traditions, see Gaudet (1992).

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Afterword

On 28 August 2005, New Orleans was devastated by the catastrophic hurricane Katrina and the subsequent flooding of the city. One month later, on September 24, Louisiana was hit by Hurricane

Rita. The pulling of ribbons in wedding cakes may seem a rather trivial focus in the aftermath of so much loss and suffering. This custom, however, illustrates the importance and persistence of New Orleans cultural traditions. The maintenance, preservation, and celebration of cultural rituals such as Mardi Gras and king cakes, jazz funerals and the second line, *café au lait* and *beignets* at the French Market, are part of New Orleans identity—a multicultural and multiracial identity that includes all classes and socioeconomic levels. Even before the physical New Orleans is rebuilt, its cultural traditions are likely to be resurrected, in some form, somewhere.