

How has cake functioned as a cultural and symbolic element in rituals and celebrations across different societies, and how has its meaning evolved in the context of globalization?

Aiymzhan Tulenbergenova

Abstract

This paper explores the history of cake, showing how it has changed from simple, bread-like desserts sweetened with honey to the creative and decorative cakes we have today. Throughout history, cake has reflected the society, culture, and technology of its time. By examining changes in ingredients, baking methods, their use, and cultural significance. This study shows that a cake is more than just a dessert. It reflects the development of human society and technology over time.

Keywords: cake, culture, symbolism, globalization, rituals

Introduction

The evolution of the cake is not just a sweet treat, it is a fascinating story of cultural identity, technological progress and changes in society. What started with thick honey-flavored bread used in sacred rituals has gradually evolved into the complex, multi-layered products that today dominate social media feeds. This change is not just about baking. It reflects how universal human values, global trade and technological progress shape everyday life.

From the tombs of ancient Egypt to the wedding halls of Renaissance Europe and eventually to kitchen tables throughout the modern world. The cake invariably reflected the priorities and imagination of its time. The traditions of making cakes can be traced in different civilizations and throughout history. Each era brought new ingredients, technologies, and symbolic meanings. In ancient Mesopotamia and Egypt, early varieties of sweet bread were used as religious offerings and were available only to a select few due to the lack of honey. Centuries later, due to the widespread availability of sugar as a result of colonial trade and exploitation, the cake turned from a sacred product into an artistic and public treasure. As industrialization progressed, it became easier for people to make pastries at home, thanks to new appliances such as ovens and electric mixers. In the mid-1900s, boxed cake mixes became popular in America. They made baking faster and easier, and also allowed people to enjoy decorating and making cakes in their own way.

In the 21st century, a cake is not only a dish, but also a way of self-expression. Social media platforms such as Instagram, Pinterest and TikTok have contributed to the development of cake design trends. Special attention is paid to aesthetic appeal, craftsmanship, and individual storytelling. At the same time, growing health awareness has led to the emergence of gluten-free and low-sugar vegan meals, indicating a shift in nutrition and wellness values. Globalization has led to an even wider range of ingredients, techniques, and inspirational ideas from different cultures around the world, turning the cake into an intercultural symbol of joy, identity, and innovation.

Cakes have played a vital role in forming our cultural, historical values, as well as to get visual pleasure from our culinary experiences. The aim of this literature review is to look at what various researchers say about the cultural and symbolic significance of cakes. It focuses on how cakes are used in cultural rituals, how they give people aesthetic (visual and emotional) pleasure, and how they reflect social identity and change.

There are three main key themes found in the existing literature. First, cakes are often used as cultural symbols in rituals, such as weddings, birthdays, and national feasts. Second,

cakes are a source of visual and sensory delight for those who enjoy desserts, demonstrating the potential for food to be both aesthetically pleasing and imaginative. Third, cakes serve as a reflection of societal identity and historical context, demonstrating shifts in social class, and global cultural trends. By comparing these ideas, this review helps us to understand how cake is viewed in cultural, social and historical aspects.

Cake as a cultural symbol in rituals

Cakes have always been present in human celebrations. Across different cultures and times, cakes symbolized transformation, fertility, community, and joy. Levene (2013) noted that some of the earliest cakes were used in religious or seasonal ceremonies and also tracks how previous cakes, once simple bread-like loaves, gradually developed into more complex creations, as sugar became cheaper and more accessible. These early versions, usually sweetened with honey, were purposefully shaped and sometimes offered to the gods. They were a part of something sacred. In ancient Rome, for example, simple cakes played an important role in wedding rituals, symbolizing unity and good luck for the newlyweds. While Levene (2013) emphasizes the ritual and symbolic functions of early cakes, her focus is on cultural traditions and culinary innovations. Mintz (1985), however, placed sugar and, consequently, cupcakes in a broader economic and political framework, showing how access to sweets has historically been linked to systems of trade, power, and inequality. Taken together, these points of view suggest that cakes cannot be viewed solely as symbolic or aesthetic objects. On the contrary, they reflect deeper production structures and social hierarchies. This comparison highlights the dual role of the cake.: as a cultural artifact embodying joy and ritual, as well as as a product shaped by the influence of the world history of power and exploitation.

The evolution of cake as a dessert

Mintz (1985) explains in his work on sugar how this key ingredient has changed the role of cake in society. In the same way argues that sugar eventually allowed cakes to move from ritual spaces into everyday celebrations, making dessert not only more common but also more symbolic of joy and abundance. Sugar was once rare and expensive, but as it became more available through colonial trade, it also became more common in everyday life. Along with this shift came new meanings. For example, cake-cutting turned into a key ritual in many cultures marking important life events and shared moments. These rituals often represent unity, transition, or blessing. The cake has transformed from a dish reserved for the elite to a dish served on birthdays, weddings and public holidays.

At the same time, cakes demonstrate how culture shapes aesthetic pleasure. For example, in France, confectionery traditions emphasize sophistication and elegance, while in the United States, the popularity of cake packaging in the mid-20th century reflected the values of convenience and home creation (Overby, 2018). Thus, the evolution of desserts shows that cakes serve not only as food, but also as a cultural event, celebrating beauty, imagination and social significance through edible art. This comparison shows that cakes have different meanings depending on the cultural context. French traditions associate cakes with status and sophistication, while American customs associate them with practicality and family life. However, by focusing only on national examples, one may lose sight of how globalization mixes these traditions. However, the examples given show that cakes are not neutral. They reflect what every society values most, whether it's elegance, convenience, or creativity.

Modern Trends and Social Identity

Montanari (2006) adds that food rituals often reflect what people care about most. Cakes, in particular, help express cultural values, emotions, and identity. In China, for example,

mooncakes are a symbol of family unity during the Mid-Autumn Festival (Yang et al., 2024). In Christian traditions, cakes at Easter or Christmas connect food to faith, memory, and celebration. In the author's opinion cakes do more than taste good. They carry history, emotion, and meaning. Through rituals, they help people mark change, come together, and pass on traditions. Also as Montanari (Food is Culture, 2006) explains, food frequently carries aesthetic meaning, and desserts in particular embody creativity, beauty, and sensory enjoyment. Cakes became a medium for artistry, with decoration, color, and shape reflecting cultural values and aesthetic ideals. Goldstein (2015) highlights that cake design has long been associated with display on social media, from Renaissance sugar sculptures to modern, sophisticated wedding cakes and Instagram-worthy creations. Mintz (1985) considers sugar mainly through the prism of trade and power, leaving aside the symbolic and emotional side of the cake. While Montanari (2006) and Goldstein (2015) focus more on how people attach importance to cakes through rituals and decorations, they overlook the economic issues behind the development of cakes. This demonstrates two different approaches to understanding the cake: one as a product shaped by world history and economics, and the other as a cultural object filled with creativity and identity. Taken together, these views suggest that the cake is shaped by great historical forces and everyday cultural practices.

At the same time, cakes demonstrate how culture shapes aesthetic pleasure. For example, in France, confectionery traditions emphasize sophistication and elegance, while in the United States, the popularity of cake packaging in the mid-20th century reflected the values of convenience and home creation. Thus, the evolution of desserts shows that cakes serve not only as food, but also as a cultural event, celebrating beauty, imagination and social significance through edible art. This comparison shows that cakes have different meanings depending on the cultural context. French traditions associate cakes with status and sophistication, while American customs associate them with practicality and family life. However, by focusing only on national examples, one may lose sight of how globalization mixes these traditions. However, the examples given show that cakes are not neutral. They reflect what every society values most, whether it's elegance, convenience, or creativity.

Conclusion

This literature review examined how cakes are understood as cultural symbols, aesthetic objects, and a reflection of social identity. Starting with Leven's (2013) mention of early ritual consumption and ending with Mintz's (1985) analysis of sugar and energy, the literature shows that desserts are both a product of cultural significance and a product of larger economic and political structures. Montanari (2006) and Goldstein (2015) emphasize once again that cakes embody creativity, art, and individuality, while Mintz's structural project reminds us that these traditions were shaped by global trade and inequality. Taken together, these studies show that the cake can be viewed in two aspects: as part of broad historical forces and as part of everyday cultural practice. The symbolic functions of the cake, such as unity, fertility, and celebration, are inseparable from the material realities of sugar production and availability. Finally, it is important to note that most of the reviewed works are devoted to the historical development of the cake, rather than its modern significance. The impact of globalization, social media, and current health trends is less represented in the literature, indicating a gap in future research.



Bibliography

Levene, A. (2013). *Cake: A slice of history*. London: Chatto & Windus.

Lemei, Y. (2006). China's Mid-Autumn Day. *Journal of Folklore Research*, 43(3), 263–270. <https://doi.org/10.2979/jfr.2006.43.3.263>

Overby, R. (2018). *A Cakewalk Through History: The Evolution of Cake and its Identity in America* (Undergraduate Honors Thesis, Butler University). Butler University.

Tilly, C. (1978). Did the Cake of Custom Break? (CRSO Working Paper No. 189). Center for Research on Social Organization, University of Michigan. Draft of Chapter 2 in J. Merriman (Ed.), *Consciousness and Class Experience in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Holmes & Meier, 1979).

Yang, R., Hu, L., Zhang, Q., & Wan, X. (2024). Mooncake packaging design in the context of ageing under the perspective of humanistic care. *Journal of Education, Humanities and Social Sciences*, 41, 95–99. <https://doi.org/10.54097/bbtrbv31>