

Folk Belief and Rituals about Bread in Sweden, Some Interpretations
and Comparisons with Today's Hipster Culture.

Katarina Ek-Nilsson

Abstract.

Among traditions concerning bread baking, breads connected with celebration of Christmas are special. There were Christmas breads baked like birds, pigs, horses and more imaginative shapes, to be given to the children. There were also yellow so called "Lucia cats" (*lussekatter*), baked with saffron. Those buns are still today baked every year in most households in Sweden. One special bread for Christmas, the "Christmas cake" or "spring cake" used to be saved until the spring farming, and was then divided and given to the horse(s) or the ox(en), as well as to every member of the family. Finally, the rest could be crumbled and spread over a field. This ritual has by older folklorists been interpreted as a kind of fertility cult. I want to discuss those interpretations.

I will also compare older day's bread tradition with today's hipster culture in urban postmodern Sweden, where young fathers bake their own sour dough bread. This can also be interpreted as a kind of ritual, maybe not so far from the old farmer's ambition to provide for the family's welfare.

Key words: Bread, Christmas, fertility, ritual, hipster

Bread is more than just something to eat. Bread is a symbol for life, a symbol for surviving and also a symbol for celebrating, for festivals, and so it has been for hundreds of years. If you do not have bread, you have nothing to eat.

No wonder that ethnologists have taken an interest in how different kinds of bread have been expressing social and cultural standards, working organisations, and celebrations.

In Swedish ethnology, professor Åke Campbell, in 1950 published his book *The Swedish bread* (Det svenska brödet), which is a comparative ethnographical/historical investigation of how bread was made, and what meaning it had through the decades until the middle of the twentieth century.

The history of baking shows us that it all started with baking the bread over the fire in a simple way. In Sweden in older times the dough was made by barley, maybe flour from peas, or rye, water and nothing else.

Bread-baking was made only twice in a year. It had to be dried and it had to be stored.

Baking twice in a year meant work for many days, when the women in a village baked together and men were banned. This was an exclusively female field of work and come-together.

For festivals, and especially Christmas, other bread was made, bread which were not for storing but for consuming during Christmas.

Those breads were decorated, they were soft, they were baked from rye but some could even be baked from wheat, which was extremely rare.

The bread were laid in piles on the table on Christmas eve, one pile for every member of the family, in some cases completed with a cheese. The children were often given bread in shape of pigs, horses or other animals, and also an apple. In the middle of the table there was one, sometimes two, round loafs. The 13th of January, when Christmas was over, only those round loafs, one or two, were left, and they were saved until spring.

Those so called Christmas cakes or spring cakes were given to the people on the farm, and to the horses, on the first day of sowing in the spring. This very special bread was considered as a survival by folklorists and ethnologists in the decades around nineteen hundred (P:n Nilsson 1915, Keyland 1919 et al). Åke Campbell, whose book about the Swedish bread I mentioned before, however, never made such presumptions. He did not at all discuss the possibility of breads being survivals from pre-Christian periods. The survival theories from Frazers, Mannhardts and Tylors studies were since a long time abandoned among the ethnologists and folklorists when Campbell published his bread book in 1950. Other ethnologists, like Albert Eskeröd, also discussed the bread for Christmas, including the spring cake, in a more functional way. The attempts to make interpretations of Christmas bread as evidences of a pre-Christian, Old Norse cult concerning bread are hopeless, he wrote. The survival theories take it for granted that once there was a cultural unity, which over time had been destructed, leaving some fragments. Instead, Eskeröd suggests that the meaning of the spring cake certainly is to give extraordinary power to the horse and to the family before the hard work of sowing. In people's fantasy and magical thinking Christmas could load the bread with this power. This is example of how farmers in premodern time, long before the modern and rational farming, made efforts to guarantee the surviving of the family, with the help of the supernatural (Eskeröd 1953). There is no reason for the presumptions that the spring cake should be a heritage from pre-Christian periods.

Earlier, however, folklorists said, for example: The bread for Christmas show us very old tradition from the pre-Christian times. The traditions connected to Christmas food and specially to Christmas bread would, if You believe in the survival theories concerning fertility rituals,

then have to be regarded as survivals from prehistoric times when there were magic rituals, in a fertility cult, to get good harvests. The Christmas cake, which is saved until spring and then divided into several pieces to be eaten by the family members and the horses, thus was an adequate element for a survival interpretation. Sometimes a small piece could even be crumbled and spread over the field. Martin P:n Nilsson, a Swedish folklorist and religion historian, wrote that the tradition how to handle the Christmas cake is an expression of the conception that fertility during the year to come is within this cake, baked from last year's crop (Nilsson 1915). That is, ideas about the last sheaf. Saying this, he declares to colleagues that he is making his studies within the survival theories which were dominant and accepted by most scholars at the time. This was written in 1915 and it was probably the only possible interpretation at the time being. Nilsson had to declare himself as a researcher with knowledge and capacity, just like we all have to work within the frames of today's knowledge and theoretical paradigm.

Nilsson also makes an interpretation of the fact that the Christmas table is laid with bread and all kinds of Christmas food – pork, cheese, butter, porridge – all night between Christmas Eve and Christmas Day for deceased family members, who were supposed to visit the old home during this night. This is a survival, Nilsson suggests, of pre-historic sacrifices to fertility goddesses, without presenting any evidence.

Breads looking like pigs or horses, baked to amuse the children at Christmas, were for Nilsson and his generation the evidence of Old Norse sacrifices of pigs and other animals to the gods. However, those breads cannot have been baked before Medieval time, for the simple reason that they imply fermented bread – and that kind of bread was unknown in Sweden until late Medieval time, and, furthermore, they did not become common among most people until after Medieval time (Campbell 1950). Nilsson, and other fertility scholars therefore, and also for other reasons, construct their theories from a weak empirical basis.

A bread which today is called "Lucia cat", is a saffron bun still eaten on Lucia Day. This kind of buns seems to have been imported from Germany in the 17th century, a fact that would not have been accepted by survival theorists who would like to give those buns a much longer nordic history. There is a legend that the devil, in shape of a cat, punished the children, while Jesus instead gave buns to nice kids. To keep the devil away the buns were coloured and given taste with saffron, a very expensive spice.

This tradition is today, in contrast to other Christmas bread, very much alive today.

I dare say You could not meet one person in Sweden today who does not eat those yellow "Lucia cats", with beginning on Advent Sunday or earlier and until Christmas. Most families bake them, but You can also buy them in any café or grocer's shop.

In a way one could say that those buns are used in a magic way, even if it is a very diluted magic. When everyone is waiting, and longing, for Christmas, the “Lucia cats” give promises about the Christmas festival to come, and make Christmas feel a little closer.

Even other kinds of bread or cakes can be said to be “magic”. With a strawberry cake, with whipped cream and fresh strawberries, summer starts. It means that no celebrating of Mother’s day, school examination, or birthday parties from the middle of May until the end of July can take place without a strawberry cake. The strawberry cake makes a summer.

So, what is the meaning of bread in Sweden today? Home-made is the key word. When Campbell wrote his book about bread around 1950 he presumed that the time of home-made bread was over or almost over. Even in the countryside, house-wives wanted to buy bread. He writes in the English summary:

It is comparatively recently that the professional bakery trade which had ancient traditions in the towns, began to cater to the country people’s demand for daily bread. Bakers established bakeries in the villages, following the trade traditions which had long belonged to the towns. Already the abolition of trade restrictions in 1846 was a threat to the home-made bread, but in spite of that it survived in most country houses during the whole of the 19th century. During the 20th century bakery-made bread is, however, becoming more generally used among country people, and especially among lumberers and other non-farmers.

This was 1950. Twenty years later something happened. Suddenly an interest for baking at home started among young parents. Today this interest has grown even more. You cannot be really trendy if you do not bake your own bread – with sour dough, not yeast. This belongs to the so called hipster culture, growing especially in Stockholm and other big cities among fairly young, well educated people, rather well paid and politically aware, for example journalists, psychologists, economics, consultants, doctors.

Baking your own sour dough bread has become a male business. Young, trendy, well educated fathers spend much time with their children. Swedish parents have almost two years of paid parental leave – 102 weeks, and you can share it as you like. Many parents share it so that the mother and the father stay at home, first the mother for one year, then the father also for a year. It seems that the most extreme sour dough-trend has grown among those young fathers, especially in the most hip areas of Stockholm city. The parental leave and the values coming from political awareness and strong ideas about equality contribute to a special culture in postmodern, urban Sweden, in which home-made bread has a special and protected place.

In this part of Stockholm, south city, there are even some hotels for sour dough. When going away, you must have someone taking care of your dear sour dough.

Furthermore, if you travel through Sweden on the small roads in the summer you will also find signs telling you about cafés with home-made (*hembakt*) buns and cakes.

So, in postmodern Sweden, home-made bread, buns and cakes symbolize quality and – why not – contact with the old farmer Sweden.

My question is, if the difference between the young hipster father in Stockholm south city and the father on a farm in nineteenth century Sweden, who gave pieces from the Christmas cake to the family members really is that big. Is it not in both cases a question of giving a good quality of life to your family? For one of them, a good harvest next year so that you wouldn't have to starve, for the other one good health and security about what you give to your family to eat.

References:

Campbell, Åke, 1950, *Det svenska brödet, en jämförande etnologisk-historisk undersökning*. Stockholm.

Eskeröd, Albert, 1953, *Årets fester*. LT förlag, Halmstad.

Frazer, James George, 1911-1925, *The Golden Bough*, I-12, London

Keyland, Nils, 1919, *Julbröd/julbockar och staffansång*. Nordiska museet, Stockholm.

Mannhardt, Wilhelm, 1875.1877, *Wald- und Feldkulte 1-2*, Berlin

Nilsson, Martin, P:N, 1915, *Årets folkliga fester*. Hugo Gebers förlag, Stockholm.

Nylund Skog, Susanne, 2013, Auktoritet och allegori. En diskussion om folkminnesmaterial och folklivsforskning vid 1900-talets början. I: *RIG nr. 3:2013*, Stockholm.

Illustration: The Swedish saffron buns "Lucia cats". Photo from "Sju sorters kakor", ICA bokförlag, 1985.

