



Celebrating the Family

Ethnicity, Consumer Culture, and Family Rituals

Elizabeth H. Pleck

Celebrating the Family

ETHNICITY, CONSUMER CULTURE,
AND FAMILY RITUALS

ELIZABETH H. PLECK

HARVARD UNIVERSITY PRESS

Cambridge, Massachusetts, and London, England 2000

For Joe and Dan

Copyright © 2000 by the President and Fellows of Harvard College
All rights reserved
Printed in the United States of America

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Pleck, Elizabeth Hafkin.

Celebrating the family : ethnicity, consumer culture, and family rituals /
Elizabeth H. Pleck.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-674-00230-X (cloth : alk. paper)—ISBN 0-674-00279-2 (paper : alk. paper)

1. Holidays—Economic aspects—United States.
2. Special events—Economic aspects—United States.
3. Family—United States.
4. Rites and ceremonies—United States.
5. Consumption (Economics)—United States.
6. United States—Economic conditions.
7. United States—Social life and customs. I. Title.

GT4986.A1 P54 2000

394.26973—dc21 99-045200

Acknowledgments

I began this book shortly after my father's funeral. He lived his last twelve years in a nursing home, the last five not recognizing any of his family. My mother had died two years before. I had finished a book about the history of family violence and could not bear to write about another unhappy subject. I was also seeking some academic way to continue thinking about what the death of my parents meant to me. Many times in my writing about family ritual, I found myself drifting off into memories of a simpler past. I would have to pull myself back from my reveries, reminding myself of the tricks that ritual can play with memory.

Many librarians and archivists have offered their assistance in my work. I want to thank the staff at the University of Illinois, Urbana/Champaign Library, especially the interlibrary loan and special collections departments and the Illinois Historical Survey. I am also indebted to the staffs at the Sophia Smith Collection of the Smith College Library, the Minnesota Historical Society, the Immigrant History Research collection, the Marriott Library at the University of Utah, the Fife Folklore Collection of Utah State University, the Arizona Historical Society, the Chicago Historical Society, the Jewish Historical Society at Brandeis University, Widener Library of Harvard University, the University of California at Berkeley, the Balch Institute for Ethnic Studies, the Philadelphia Public Library, and the La Salle University library. For help in finding illustrations and photographs I am

grateful to Alma Rosa Aguirre of the University of Texas at Brownsville and the staffs at the American Antiquarian Society, Winterthur Library, the Prints and Photographs Division of the Library of Congress, the Notre Dame Archives, the Frankenmuth Historical Association, the Florida State Archives, the Archives Center of the Smithsonian, the National Museum of American Jewish History, and the Minnesota Historical Society.

John Gillis pointed me in the right direction with his comments on a draft of the first chapter I wrote, about Thanksgiving. For suggestions on specific chapters I want to thank Jacqueline Jones, Melanie Kimball, Nicole Ranganath, Leslie Reagan, Caroline Waldron, and Chiou-ling Yeh. I learned about the history of churching, a ritual for Catholic new mothers, from Paula Rieder's dissertation on this subject and from conversations with her. I have learned a great deal from discussions about ritual with Micaela di Leonardo, Ramona Oswald, Cele Otnes, and Ellen Rothman. For specific leads in research and answers to my queries about history or folklore I am grateful to H. Arnold Barton, Joan Jacobs Brumberg, Matt Garcia, Nancy J. Hafkin, Robert Johannsen, Daniel Littlefield, Colleen McDannell, June Namias, Andrew Nolan, Vicki Ruiz, Michelle Salcedo, and Judy Yung. Barbara Tenenbaum of the Library of Congress gave me many good leads to track down in finding more about the history of the quinceañera. Johanna Jacobsen did research for this book in the Folklore Archives of the University of California at Berkeley. Drafts of various chapters were delivered at the Center for Research on Women at Wellesley College, the History Workshop of the University of Illinois, the third annual Family History conference at Carleton University, the Institute for the Study of Values and Ethics at the University of Illinois, and the history faculty at Michigan State University. A portion of Chapter 2 was published, in somewhat altered form, as "The Making of the Domestic Occasion: The History of Thanksgiving in the United States," *Journal of Social History* 32 (Summer 1999), pp. 773–789.

For their valuable suggestions in reading the entire manuscript I owe special thanks to Howard Chudacoff, Estelle Freedman, Donna Gabaccia, Fred Jaher, Leslie Moch, and Louise Tilly. A mentor and friend for several decades, Louise helped sharpen my argument and encouraged me to cut unnecessary detail. An Illinois Research Board Grant in 1995 made it possible for me to travel to several archives.

I wrote several chapters of this book while enjoying a fellowship from the University of Illinois's Institute for the Study of Values and Ethics in 1997. At Harvard University Press I have benefited from the advice of Aida Donald and from Donna Bouvier's careful pruning of my sentences.

The latest thinking about ritual describes it as a process, rather than as a distinct and separate activity. My own process has been aided at every step by my husband, Joseph Pleck, and my son, Daniel Pleck. Joe has been the finest critic of my writing. Some of my best sources have come from articles he clipped from magazines. When I was searching for a phrase to describe the changes in twentieth-century ritual, he suggested "postsentimental." Dan has asked me who the Pilgrims were, what the origins of the goody bag were, and many other questions about ritual. I was proud to be able to answer most of his questions. I am also grateful to have been able to share both ordinary and special times with the two of them.

Contents

Acknowledgments	vii
1 Festivals, Rites, and Presents	1
2 Family, Feast, and Football	21
3 Holiday Blues and Pfeffernusse	43
4 Easter Breads and Bunnies	73
5 Festival of Freedom	95
6 Eating and Explosives	117
7 Cakes and Candles	141
8 Rites of Passage	162
9 Please Omit Flowers	184
10 The Bride Once Wore Black	207
11 Rituals, Families, and Identities	233
Notes	251
Index	325

Illustrations follow page 140.

Festivals, Rites, and Presents

Why should we not, as families, make more account of commemorative occasions?

—MRS. C. A. HALBERT, 1871

At certain times of year or moments in life it is important “to have family” and difficult to be without one.¹ Sociologist Theodore Caplow, in studying a Midwestern city, which he dubbed Middletown, in the 1970s, argued that American holidays had become celebrations of the family, their main purpose being to pay homage to an ideal of the privatized, affectionate family, with a mother nurturing her children at its center. He wrote, “Every widely observed festival in Middletown now celebrates the family and the related ideas of home, mother and child, and feminine roles.”² Caplow did not look closely enough at the holiday atmosphere of the 1970s, however, because a basic shift had already occurred.

This book traces three phases in the development of family ritual. The first, which began in colonial America and derived from the Protestant Reformation, was characterized by either a carnivalesque, outdoor form of celebration or a lack of attention to ritual. The second phase, dating from the early nineteenth century, saw the rise of the sentimental occasion, a family ritual either inside or outside the home that centered around consumerism and a display of status and wealth to celebrate home and family. After World War I and especially in the 1970s and later, what I shall call a postsentimental attitude toward family celebration began to appear. Framed often as a reaction to what was perceived as the excesses of sentimentality, the postsentimental approach to holiday celebration recognizes, if not cele-

brates, family diversity as well as ethnic and racial pluralism. These transformations in how the family is celebrated and how the family celebrates holidays and special events were the result of changes on many fronts—in the family, in women's roles, in ethnic group consciousness, and in nationalism, consumer culture, and popular entertainment.

An easy way to understand the significance of American family rituals is to demonstrate their economic importance to the modern American economy. Every October the sale of Halloween supplies such as Ross Perot masks, Count Dracula fangs, and miniature peanut butter cups contributes \$400 million to the gross domestic product. In 1996, weddings generated revenues of \$31 billion a year; funerals brought in about \$11 billion; and the greeting card industry earned \$6.3 billion. Christmas, which I call a "family ritual" (or "domestic occasion") but is also considered a holiday, accounted for about \$149 billion in gift and card purchases in November and December 1996.³ Nearly one fourth of all yearly retail sales in the United States in 1992 came from Christmas purchases. That year even supermarkets generated 20 percent of their receipts and made 30 percent of their profits between Thanksgiving and New Year's.⁴ If it is true, as Joyce Hall, the founder of Hallmark, claimed, that "sentiment sells," then even these partial sales figures suggest that sentiment, expressed in family rituals, adds up to almost \$200 billion a year.

The commercialism of so many family rituals causes great unease. The din of the cash register during the Christmas season, the "jingle of gilded trinkets," it is said, drowns out the religious meaning of the holiday. Almost everyone complains that Christmas is too commercialized. The public castigates merchants, advertisers, manufacturers, and even guileless consumers taken in by Muzak and colored lights. Many cultural critics argue that consumer culture has not only cheapened the meaning of Christmas and other holidays but has created ersatz ones as well. Greeting card manufacturers, confectioners, and florists sugar-coated Mother's Day, transforming what had been a day to contemplate world peace into a holiday to send flowers to mother. Advertisers and neckwear manufacturers made Father's Day, a holiday that many men considered silly, into a fixture on the American calendar. Kodak and Hallmark, AT&T and Macy's, Coca-Cola and Montgomery Ward have shaped American celebrations, creating new representations of Santa, new folkloric figures (such as Rudolph the

Red Nosed Reindeer), new rituals (such as parades), and new visual images of ritual, all in the service of encouraging consumers to buy their products and services.

Such complaints are neither of recent origin nor unique to late-twentieth-century America. But celebrants often designed the post-sentimental occasion as an active critique of the values of home, family, and woman's place honored in the sentimental occasion, in addition to complaining about excessive commercialism. Because the postsentimental approach depends on parody or critique of American sentimentality, it requires the continued existence of sentimentalism. In the postsentimental era of celebration, sentimentality has not disappeared, but instead has become a subject of debate.

Just as the sentimental occasion was the ideal form of festivity for the affectionate family, so too the postsentimental occasion fit the reality of postmodern family life.⁵ According to anthropologist Judith Stacey, who coined the term "postmodern family," the American family since the 1970s has no longer had a single dominant form; there has been a great deal of public debate about what the family should be; and family life has become highly fluid and flexible. The male breadwinner–female homemaker family is no longer the universal standard for the family, nor is it even the most frequent household type. These changes were caused by a series of overlapping revolutions in attitudes toward sex, contraception, and abortion; intermarriage across religious, ethnic, and racial lines; women's roles; race; homosexuality; and divorce. Family residential arrangements changed. Many people, especially the elderly, lived in single-person households. Cohabitation became an alternative to marriage as well as a stage prior to it, and became more acceptable among the privileged classes, rather than a way of life found mainly among the poor. Such vast, sweeping changes led to acceptance of new styles of living as well as to backlash against the changes. A political and cultural shouting match began in the late 1970s, which invoked the much-disputed term "family values." One side advocated a single standard of family life and sexual morality; the other held that Americans had to accept cultural pluralism and diversity of sexual mores and family forms.

Of the wrenching changes that affected the American family between the 1960s and the 1980s the most important, from the point of view of family ritual, was the growth in married women's employment. From temporary work before marriage and after their children

were of school age, women moved to a more or less permanent commitment to paid work. This single dramatic change reverberated in almost every facet of the marital relationship. Pursuing an education and having a job, in some cases a career, women were beginning to put their own happiness and independence first, and even postponed marrying.

As part of the postsentimental era, magazines and newspapers began to print articles on how to combat “holiday blues.” Families began to use celebrations as a special time to assert a waning ethnic identity. Women put in less time organizing and preparing postsentimental occasions and as a result experienced less affirmation of their central role in the family. People brought new values to understanding such rituals: they saw them through the prism of their search for privacy, personal fulfillment, happiness, and individuality. Sociologist Robert Bellah nicely summarized the postsentimental desire for family privacy combined with the quest for self-realization. In the nineteenth century, he argued, writers often described the family as the refuge from individualism. In the last third of the twentieth century, he added, “individualism is in the family as well as outside it.”⁶

Most students of U.S. history date the emergence of postsentimental values to the 1890s or even earlier, because so much of postsentimentalism partakes of consumerism and individualism, traces of which can be found in America as early as the eighteenth century.⁷ One characteristic of individualism—noted even in the earliest novels—was the wish to marry for love. Another was the desire for personal fulfillment through marriage. The United States has always had the highest divorce rate in the industrialized world because more U.S. couples than elsewhere try to realize their expectations for personal happiness through marriage—and end up disappointed.

As for consumerism, the desire to seek personal fulfillment, and even identity, through purchases had for centuries been an element of celebrations among the elite. Mass production and mass consumption made luxury items available to the average American. In addition, as early as around 1900 American advertising and movies appealed to the emotions and reinforced values already present: that one should seek pleasure, gain satisfaction, realize one’s fantasies, find the man or woman of one’s dreams. Films, magazines, and advertisements conveyed the view that the American consumer—often seen as a woman—could take on a new, improved identity (as a fairy princess

or queen for a day, for example). What changed was less the desire for personal satisfaction and happiness than the means available to the average person to realize that desire. Thus, the precise dating of the holiday consumer economy varies by holiday and commodity. Most Americans did not buy candy bars as an everyday treat until the 1920s; the average working-class family did not own a radio (to listen to a football game on Thanksgiving) until the 1930s. Overall, by the 1950s the white working class, and in the 1960s the emerging black middle class, began to live in an economy of abundance rather than scarcity. They may have wanted to buy and spend before that, but could not afford to, except for an occasional splurge.

This view of the decline of the carnivalesque and the rise of the sentimental and then the postsentimental is quite different from Caplow's and from popular understanding. Most people believe the contemporary family is in a state of moral decline. To them the past is the place where virtue resides. The transformation of some rituals and the disappearance of others furnishes evidence of the demise of the family and its moral lapse. There are two forms of discourse about family decline, one for the American mainstream, and another for ethnic groups perceived as being outsiders to the mainstream.

Commentators on mainstream culture invariably bemoan one symptom of family decline, the disappearance of the family meal. Families, they claim, lack any fixed time when they converse and eat a leisurely meal together. With the decline in a set meal time, critics argue, a sense of common family purpose and a feeling of togetherness have been lost. When employed mothers are not blamed, the problem is said to arise from divorce, the decline in religious belief and practice, the effects of a narcissistic, individualistic culture, the overly scheduled life children lead, and the omnipresent television set.

In the ethnic discourse about family decline, the main target is not consumer culture, but the demise of a sense of kinship, family solidarity, and community within the ethnic group. Many "ethnic" films express this theme, among them Francis Ford Coppola's *The Godfather* (1970). The movie portrays a close-knit Sicilian-American family, presided over by a Mafia chieftain, who, although a criminal, is deeply committed to family solidarity and his own code of ethics. After the godfather dies, so does the sense of community and family solidarity he stands for. Many social critics, such as Stephen Steinberg, agree with Coppola's point of view. Steinberg argues that ethnicity in mod-

ern America consists “mainly of vestiges of decaying cultures that have been so tailored to middle-class patterns that they have all but lost their distinctive qualities.”⁸ Unlike in the mainstream jeremiad, in this one ritual persists, but has lost its authenticity with the decline in community.

Research has shown, however, that many so-called traditions practiced in America are little more than a century and a half old. Historians Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger coined the term “invented tradition” to describe a ritual that implies continuity with the past, even though that continuity is largely fictitious.⁹ Hobsbawm and Ranger traced the history of public, not private, rituals, especially in the late nineteenth century, although their concept is elastic enough to pertain to both. Invented traditions, they note, are a social construction, created by people in the present out of a need for a sense of connection with the past, and from a desire to stop the clock in order to keep at least one small part of life always the same.¹⁰ In their view invented traditions are indications of change, not stability. Hobsbawm and Ranger noted that Bastille Day, kilt-wearing, the Olympics, and the pledge of allegiance are all “traditions” that originated since the eighteenth century, the last three being created in the late nineteenth century. These were entirely new ceremonies, they argued, intended to create the fiction of shared national identity and national unity during times when national unity appeared fragile.

Kwanzaa, devised by Ron (Maulana) Karenga in 1966, conforms most closely to Hobsbawm and Ranger’s concept of an invented tradition. Kwanzaa was a nationalist—specifically, black nationalist—holiday and had a specific creator, who designed it as a celebration of the African harvest, with the intention that American blacks, in exile from their African homeland, would continue tradition and celebrate their African heritage. Fifty-eight years earlier Anna Jarvis had invented another American family ritual, Mother’s Day. A church organist and Sunday school teacher, Jarvis, mourning the loss of her mother, helped organize Mother’s Day services in her hometown of Grafton, Virginia, and in Philadelphia. A few years later Sonora Dodd of Arizona suggested a day for fathers to honor men like her own father, who raised her and her siblings after her mother’s death. Kwanzaa, Mother’s Day, and Father’s Day, created by specific individuals for specific purposes, fall at one end of the scale. At the other are family rituals such as graduation parties, wedding anniversaries, and

family reunions that have no explicit creator and no single date of origin.¹¹

Four centuries ago the annual cycle of holidays and feasts was either simple and sparse or raucous and communal. As a result of the Reformation, many Protestants turned away from the pagan rituals of recognizing life and death at the winter solstice and celebrating the rebirth of spring to make the Sabbath their major weekly ritual, indeed their most important one. Among American Puritans, for example, family rituals were few and modest. They opposed celebrating Christmas and Easter, since they viewed these holidays as “papist,” and observed only one occasion—the Sabbath—regularly. Even their funerals and weddings were relatively simple affairs, at which kin were not expected to gather. The Puritans are significant both for the nature of their ritual—its lack of seasonality and its simplicity—and for their attitude toward celebration. Religious leaders in the Protestant Reformation defined ritual as a legitimate subject of controversy. By singling out Catholic practices they did not approve of, Protestant reformers developed the idea of ritual as a distinct form of rote, often liturgical, action. From them we also derive some of our condemnation of false or hollow celebration as “mere” ritual.¹²

At the same time, holidays for the popular classes, at least for non-Puritans, varied from today’s in a quite different respect. These people celebrated some of their festivals as community events or as carnivals, times for begging and ritualized aggression, cross-dressing and masquerading, gluttony and sexual license. Wearing costumes and masks, revelers had a great deal of freedom to misbehave. The celebrants often inverted class or racial hierarchy and lampooned the ruling elite, violating rules governing ordinary behavior with seeming impunity.¹³ In this way the elite, by permitting some social conflict to be expressed, defused it and rendered it harmless. The day after the carnival, the world returned to normal, unchanged. In both premodern Europe and America carnival was a time of disorder, but only in Europe did rowdies turn into rebels, causing riots and murders, resulting in celebrants occasionally being forbidden to wear masks.¹⁴ American masking and mumming could be disorderly, but it was less political. Carnival processions and dances usually took place out-of-doors. Men pulled down their pants and joked; women watched and laughed. People also celebrated much more as communities rather than as nuclear families. Thus, for example, in many rural areas and

especially among slaves and ex-slaves, corn shucking was a special time—an outdoor gathering that combined work, food, drinking, singing, and conviviality.¹⁵

Because the growing middle class saw carnivalesque celebrations as lawless and debauched, they tried and mainly succeeded in stamping them out. They regarded the carnival style as an improper way to celebrate Christmas, Thanksgiving, and many other holidays. As a result, a sentimental and commercial style of celebration, the form preferred by the more powerful and respectable bourgeoisie, became dominant, just as the urban middle class itself triumphed in short stories and sentimental novels. In the nineteenth century this stratum of society had the means to purchase both metal caskets for funerals and rocking horses as Christmas gifts. The Victorians (whose era I roughly define as the decades from 1820 to 1890) virtually created the child-centered, sentimentalized occasion. Wealthy and middle-class Victorians wanted to make their family events displays of new standards of etiquette, respectability, beauty, and wealth.

They invented a long list of new holidays and made their rites of passage into beautiful pageants. During these seven decades Santa Claus and the Christmas tree entered the parlor. Family, friends, and sweethearts began to send lace paper greetings on St. Valentine's Day. The white wedding—a bride in white, a wedding cake in white—departed dramatically from the plain, informal services that had been the norm. Couples married for decades began to hold formal gatherings to commemorate the anniversary of the date of their wedding. Parents took note of the date of a child's birth by hosting a special party. After a death, the wake went on for several days; the funeral service took place in a church, and hundreds of men and women might walk or ride in carriages from there to the grave. In wearing mourning clothes grieving relatives were a living symbol of how death sundered family ties. As for happier occasions, middle-class families sought a pastoral setting away from the home for a family vacation. The Protestant Sabbath became child-oriented and mother-directed.

The Victorians dressed up some of the grandest rituals of the modern calendar—Thanksgiving, Christmas, and Easter—and added glamour to celebrations of the major transitions of life. It is at first easy to conclude, as Caplow did, that people in the contemporary United States are simply drawing on Victorian style, using little embellishments (such as “Jingle Bell Rock” or *The Grinch Who Stole*

Christmas for that holiday, for example) as modern additions. Moreover, some of the key meanings of these festivals have also been passed down—Thanksgiving as a holiday of the family and of a nation blessed with liberty and bounty, Christmas and Easter as special times for children. By these standards, the twentieth century may appear to be culturally impoverished. However, some highly popular traditions were invented then, such as baby showers, Mother's Day, Father's Day, Kwanzaa, and Superbowl Sunday.

Though it is true that the time pressures of modern life have generally caused family rituals to be shortened and simplified, and many traditions to be cast aside entirely, at the same time, weddings have become more elaborate, expensive, and time consuming. By making the lavish wedding the grandest occasion of all, Americans, who define the wedding as the essence of family, are actually rejecting Victorian beliefs about the sentimental occasion. Part of the essence of sentimentalism was that the sad event was more significant than the happy one, and that families needed to gather for all the special times in the life cycle. Thus, Victorians gave about equal attention to christenings as to weddings, and made funerals the grandest occasion of all.

Postsentimentalism gives less attention to the sad occasion, in part because of the desire to deny death, in part because of an optimistic consumer and popular culture that defines spending as a means to achieve happiness. Family parties after christenings, first communions, and confirmations have become optional. But since the 1960s, the church wedding followed by a large reception has become very grand. Bar and bat mitzvahs and quinceañeras (a girl's fifteenth birthday celebration among Hispanics) have also grown fancier, taking on all the trappings of a lavish wedding.

In this book I examine how a variety of life cycle rituals (birth, coming of age, marriage, death), major holidays (Christmas, Easter, Thanksgiving, Chinese New Year, Passover), and children's birthday parties were invented and reinvented. The five holidays just mentioned involve significant family feasts that combine the sacred and the secular.¹⁶ Three of them are the main domestic occasions of the dominant culture; the other two, Chinese New Year and Passover, are the major family feasts of two American ethnic groups. In my discussion of life cycle rituals, I consider the main rituals of the dominant culture as well as some ethnic variations.

What Is a Family Ritual?

I define family ritual as a highly stylized cultural performance involving several family members that is repeated, has a formal structure, and involves symbolic behavior (gestures; highly scripted or repeated words, such as “I do” in a wedding and “Dayenu” in the Passover seder; or actions). The formal structure usually has a fixed order, with a distinct beginning, middle, and end.¹⁷ When rituals recur, participants usually repeat the sequence of routines in exactly the same order.

Although rituals have a distinct and recognizable structure and sequence, families often personalize them, adding some idiosyncratic elements. Thus, a family can refer to “our Christmas tradition,” meaning a unique custom or practice not found throughout the entire culture. Family rituals may be small events or gatherings of several hundred, bedtime stories for children or a Thanksgiving feast for three generations of the family and assorted strangers. In this book I concentrate on the highly elaborate, relatively rare rituals of the family. These usually involve feasts, where the guests gorge themselves on food and overindulge in drink. At many of these feasts there are also special ritual objects and purchased goods from party hats to Christmas presents.¹⁸ Mary Douglas and Baron Isherwood refer to these kind of family rituals as “low frequency, high rank” ones precisely because special foods are served, ceremonial objects are brought out, and gifts are often given. In part such occasions are high in rank precisely because they occur infrequently.¹⁹

Family rituals are also distinctive because of the highly stylized behavior of the celebrants. Participants are consciously aware of themselves as acting a part, behaving as if reading from a script. (Passover uses a printed prayer book; the script at the wedding can be read from a printed text, such as the Book of Common Prayer, or improvised.) Participants come to rituals expecting that certain rules will be followed, and they notice deviations. In addition, family rituals occur at special places and at a set time. As in plays, some actors have larger parts than others. But those who might be considered the audience are still bit players in the drama.

Not every ritual succeeds, but when it does, it is said to express and convey emotion. Ritual often is said to fail precisely because the audience does not “feel something” from participating in it (thus, the hol-