

School festivals, collective remembering and social cohesion: A case study of changes in Norwegian school culture

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Abstract: How does a particular Norwegian primary school community interact while preparing and carrying through the festivals of Advent/Christmas, Easter and the National Day at the end of the first decade of the 21st century? Particularly, what is the relationship between the Principal and involved staff members regarding the school's festival culture? How may possible changes in the school's festival culture be interpreted and tentatively explained? A number of collective assemblies as well as lessons of religion and life view education were observed over a period of two years, and staff members were interviewed. Observations of festival assemblies over a period of nearly twenty years are included as a comparative context. The school's collective festival periods are analysed by references to theories of collective memory. Contrasting and shared interests of school and 'church', of leaders, staff and cultural majorities and minorities are discussed. As for the school of the case study, the keeping up of the identity of its cultural majority group was concretized through 'weak' commemorative ceremonies. The festival periods were handled through current negotiations between actively involved members of both school and faith organisations. A final comment to the results of the study deals with the continued, though weakened, hegemonic character of the case school's festival culture and its possible interactions with social cohesion processes.

Introduction with research questions

In this article I will present an overview of the 'festival culture' of Coaston primary school¹ on the southern 'Bible-belt' coast of Norway² at the end of the first decade of the 21st century as an example of a variety of schools' festival cultures observed over two decades. During this period Norway has become a religiously plural and multicultural country although ca. 82 % of the population still belong to the Lutheran state church. With regard to the three conceptual phrases of the main title, the emphasis is on 'school festivals'. I will not include a theoretical discussion of 'social cohesion' in this article, only comment briefly on a possible relationship between schools' festival cultures and some aspects of social cohesion towards the end, referring to (crumbling) 'collective remembering' and contingent general values for public socialisation (Hervieu-Léger, 2006).

Life in a Norwegian primary school in some respects resembles life in general in the current Norwegian society. However, although a year starts after the Christmas/New Year holiday, the summer holiday, with July as the central month, represents the main division between the annual cycles of compulsory schooling. Special collective school assemblies and smaller arrangements may take place both at the beginning and the end of a cycle, just as there are smaller and greater occasions for festivity and solemnity during a school year. In fact, it is hard to find a sharp dividing line between times of 'festival' and 'ordinary' days. This particularly applies to the spring term, towards the end of a school year. I will

concentrate on the month of December and on the collective school rituals of lighting candles in the Advent period before the mid-winter holiday. I will also touch upon other festive particularities, including assemblies before the Easter holiday and the festivities before and on the National Day (the 17th of May).

How does a particular Norwegian primary school community interact while preparing and carrying through the festival processes of Advent/Christmas, Easter and the 17th of May at the end of the first decade of the 21st century? Particularly, what is the relationship between the Principal and involved staff members regarding the school's festival culture? How may possible changes in the school's festival culture be interpreted and tentatively explained? These are my research questions. Several juridical and otherwise normative texts certainly play a role in the issues, e.g. the Education Act of 1998 (*Opplæringsloven*), with later amendments), and the National Curriculum of 2006 (*Kunnskapsløftet*), in force³, as well as local curricular texts written by teachers of the school community, and 'culturally mediated standard texts' like the story of the Nativity in Luke chapter 2 and popular festival hymns. However, working contextually and emphasising culturally mediating tools (see below), I will rather search for other textual and bodily practices, i.e. codes for interaction generally taken for granted and learnt informally in the community. Such codes are central to the common value aspects of social cohesion.

Relevant phenomena like 'services for school communities' in the parish church (here shortened to 'school services in church') are 'a hot issue' in the mass media from time to time, particularly since the middle of the 1990s in connection with the many amendments of the compulsory school syllabus of religion and life view education and the related changes in the 1998 Education Act.⁴ Exactly because of the political tension and the controversial character of the phenomenon, there is good reason to dig empirically and theoretically a little deeper with regard to aspects of festival culture in primary schools.

Methodology, qualitative data and the relevance of collective memory theory

With an abductive methodology (Alvesson & Sköldbberg 1994, 43-46), chosen because of a long-lasting study, I will in this article primarily explore qualitatively data constructed from observations of school culture while applying central concepts from collective memory theory as used in sociology of religion and in social psychology/theory of learning. 'Abduction' involves confronting inductively constructed data and tentative discoveries (including all acknowledged and 'hidden' pre-judgements) with a relevant theoretical position in an analysis aiming at an adequate interpretation which may also be evaluated by statistical methods

(Haakedal, 2004, 51). By 'school culture' I mean the total and dynamic activity taking place in the central and peripheral space of a particular school and implying both real and hidden spiritual and material values and codes of practice.

The primary sample for analysis in this article consists of observations of collective assemblies at Coaston primary school (including 'school services in church') over two years (2007-2009), i.e. certain days in the month of December and in mid-spring, and semi-structured interviews with ten staff members carried out in order to gain the teachers' understanding of the assemblies. During the second year of observation, I also attended Flaten's (another primary school) 'Christmas service' (in the local state church) and 'Easter journey' (in a local free church) (cf. Jangaard & Lundstad 2008). These two incidents of Flaten's festival culture, as well as another twelve earlier observations of 'school services in church' will serve as my secondary sample, for comparative reasons. I have thus observed school festival culture for a period of nearly twenty years (1992-2009), including altogether fifteen 'school services in church' (Haakedal 2007).

A two-stage approach is applied. Firstly, I constructed qualitative data from the observations and recorded voices at Coaston and composed descriptive sketches based on the transcriptions and 'field texts' like festival programmes. Secondly, I discuss elements from the sketches comparatively while drawing on my previously constructed typology of 'school services in church' (Haakedal 2007) as well as the 'synchronous' observations of Flaten primary school in order to draw some conclusions about the characteristics of Coaston's festival culture.

My 'informed guess' after the first year of observation was that Coaston, even with 5-10 % pupils of 'immigrant' background, was quite a traditional school with some active teachers influencing the festival culture. This 'traditional' flavour made collective memory theories relevant. With regard to the concept of religion, the sociologist Danièle Hervieu-Léger underlines "the *reference to the legitimating authority of a tradition* as a general and distinctive characteristic of religious belief" (Hervieu-Léger 1998, 35). This definition "makes visible the *chain* which makes the individual believer a member of a community that gathers together all the past, present and future believers" (p. 35). Religion as a "chain of memory" is Hervieu-Léger's key concept to understand the trends of contemporary religiosity as well as the continued institutional secularising tendencies.

I use the following concepts and definitions from the theory of collective memory by the researcher of social psychology and culture, James V. Wertsch: 'Mediated action' is a general category of human action, like speaking and thinking, involving "an inherent,

irreducible tension between agent and ‘cultural tools’ such as language and narrative texts”. Such tools do not determine human action, but they are strongly influential (Wertsch 2002, 6). ‘Text’ is understood as “a basic organizing unit that structures meaning, communication and thought” (p. 14), ‘voice’ as referring to unique, situational utterances aiming at being received and interpreted, as well as to contextually situated voice types generally being interrelated with unique utterances (p. 16). The verbal concept of ‘remembering’ emphasizes the ongoing, dialogical process of the mind, and collective (“unself-conscious”, p. 20) ‘memory’ is contrasted to (but always interplaying with) the category of analytical, critical ‘history’ (pp. 17-20). The influence of collective memory theories will be latent in the sketches while a fuller interpretive potential from these theories will be drawn upon in the comparative discussion of the research results.

Sketches of Coaston’s festival culture

Collective time, space and central mediated actions in an annual festival cycle

Time and space are central categories with regard to the contextuality of school cultures. Annual cycles (of schooling) exemplify the passage of time. Space is a more abstract category than ‘room’ or ‘location’. In my work definition of school culture I distinguished between a school’s central and peripheral space. The music room was central to Coaston’s festival culture. As a location it was open to flexible usage, installations and decorations. It was not big enough to house all the members of the school community, so every collective assembly that took place in it had to be arranged twice. Also the sports hall some times served a collective function. Another central location was the staff room where the Principal once a week brought up matters of collective importance. Coaston’s play grounds were multifunctional. There the different age groups practiced parading before the 17th of May. A more informal walk from the school to the town centre took place each time the school community attended its ‘Christmas service’ in the parish church. In addition to time and space, I have focussed on ‘mediated action’, i.e. interactions where all the members of Coaston in one way or another communicated through and with basic ‘cultural tools’ central to the festive events and thus with a high symbolic value.

The two most considerable annual collective festival events at Coaston were the ‘Christmas service’ in the parish church and the National Day programme. The other yearly collective assemblies may be grouped around these two events.

An important function of the four collective Advent assemblies was to practice the hymns and songs to be sung at the 'Christmas service'. The programme for each assembly had the following basic structure:

- Pupils enter while music is played
- Singing
- Candle lightening ritual
- Performance by a teacher
- Singing
- Performance by a particular cohort or group of pupils
- Singing

The songs chosen for the Advent assemblies and 'Christmas service' the two years of observation included both popular traditional and modern Christmas carols, Advent songs and seasonal carols.

The ritual of lighting the Advent candles was handled by a small group of pupils. It was accompanied by unison singing. The element of the programme where there was most change from the first to the second year of observation was the performance by a teacher. The main difference here was that during the first year four staff members addressed the pupils, one for each Monday of December, while the second year only one of them, Siv Carina, a young female teacher, was responsible for all the four 'teacher performances'. She used her dramatising skills, communicating in creative ways parts of the Nativity story. The performances by the pupils could be a choir performance by a whole cohort, a PowerPoint group work, individual pupils playing instruments, or self-made dramatic features by smaller groups of pupils. Generally there was an atmosphere of expectation during the Advent assemblies. The pupils seemed to be in a mood of festive participation, e.g. by clapping enthusiastically after the performances.

The 'Christmas service' in the parish church took place the second last day before the holiday. Although a particular member of the clergy (the 'youth minister') conducted the 'service', it did not include much liturgical language, in fact only the *Lord's Prayer*. Through announcing this item, the minister managed to let the individuals in the assembly have a choice of whether or not to 'get involved' by active participation. The 'flavour' of this 'Christmas service' pointed more in the direction of a seasonal performance by pupils and teachers than in the direction of a religious festival service. On the final school day, the fourth Advent assembly was held followed by a 'singing around the Christmas tree' in the sports

hall. It was a shortened day for the pupils so that the staff afterwards could have their own end-of-term formal meal in the decorated staff room.

The second 'great' annual collective event was the 17th of May. For nearly 150 years a school children's parade has been the main morning event on the National Day. Each school Principal receives practical information from the local 17th of May Committee regarding the parading. In recent years many schools have also developed their own neighbourhood traditions. However, the central collective parading is the peak of the day. At a certain location Coaston joined other schools with banners and brass bands, and parents and the general local population in their finery cheered along the route. As for Coaston, there was a festival programme in the school yard before the start of the parade:

- Welcome by the Principal
- Running up the flag by a group of 12 year old pupils
- Singing (a traditional national hymn)
- Poetry reading by a group of 9 year old pupils
- Singing (a traditional national children's song)
- Short speech by a group of 11 year old pupils
- Singing (the National Anthem)
- Departure of the parade

The central symbolic action of this programme was the running up of the school's big Norwegian flag. It corresponded with the waving of individual flags later in the parade. The parade route went along the small town's central streets and finished in front of the parish church. There the teachers' responsibility for the children ended and parents took over.

In addition to the 17th of May programme, there was another collective festival assembly of interest during the first spring term, i.e. the Easter assembly in the music room on the final day before the Easter holiday. This tradition, including the telling of the Easter story by the fully gowned youth minister from the parish church, had only been practiced for three years. During the second year of observation, it was in fact exchanged for an 'Easter musical' directed by one of the teachers. There was, however, a certain line of symbols and activities connecting the first year Easter assembly and the 17th of May school yard assembly: The decorations in the music room at Easter included bouquets of birch twigs with multi-coloured ribbons in addition to daffodils and lighted candles on a table with a white cloth. There were also other Easter decorations in the room (eggs, chicken). Apparently, there had also been a tradition of using bouquets of leafy birch twigs together with the flags in the children's 17th of

May parade. Both assemblies involved singing traditional (religious/national) hymns. Warmer weather, sprouting green leaves, flowers, flags (with a blue and white cross on a red base) and all the 'red-letter' days of late spring (May Day/Labour Day, the 17th of May, and often also Ascension Day and Whitsun) signal the yearly change of seasons and thus the taste of freedom because of the ever closer summer holiday.

The assemblies mentioned above were all marked with symbolic icons on the poster of Coaston's annual events which included more collective icons. These sometimes showed connections between the time of the school year and the 'space' of the local society, e.g. a 'week of coastal culture' taking place in late spring. Observations during lessons of religion and life view education gave examples indicating that the collective symbols and festival culture manifested itself also on the cohort levels of the school's organisation. While teaching about Islam for the ten-year-olds, one teacher compared the Norwegian flag with flags from countries belonging to the Muslim cultural sphere. Another teacher practiced Easter songs with the nine-year-olds and made a point of distinguishing between two types of days for flying the Norwegian flag: public holidays and religious (Easter) holidays.

The internal festival organisation, exemption practice and alternative arrangements

In the first year of observation, three teachers, Christian, Christina and Charlotte (with 20 to 30 years of practice at Coaston), were regular members of a 'festival committee' (FC) while Siv Carina was a substitute member. Christian (a teacher of fine arts) and Christina became my main informants. They agreed that the present, formalised organisation of an annual cycle, including its festival culture, had started a couple of years ago, after the present Principal had been appointed. She had decided that every member of the teaching staff should have a position in one of the school's several committees. Being a member of FC had become more formalised. The present form of the four Advent assemblies had also started some years earlier. Christina explained that the atmosphere of the staff room in December was special. Each Monday morning lilac candles were lit and a mulled non-alcoholic drink served. The staff had wanted the pupils to experience some of the same atmosphere of festivity and fellowship and therefore the consecutive collective Advent assemblies in the music room had been decided upon. It was Christina's idea from the same period to arrange a collective assembly in the music room and invite the youth minister from the parish church before Easter.

According to Christina and others, the main reason for dividing the school's population of pupils into two groups 'vertically' and let one half take part in the first of two

consecutive collective assemblies while the other half worked on various subjects or themes in their usual rooms (and vice versa), was to be able to take care of the pupils whose parents would claim exemption from certain activities. The 'vertical' organisation ensured that exempted pupils were always engaged in some educational meaningful activity together with their own age group even if they had to go to the room next door to their ordinary room during assembly time. Several teachers found this mode of organising assemblies better than an earlier 'horizontal' division with one performance for the younger pupils and one for the older ones. As claims of exemption were handled on the level of each cohort by its team of teachers and not reported to the Principal or Vice Principal, I did not get exact information about the amount of exemptions from the collective assemblies in the music room. The teachers generally reported of no exemptions for the Advent assemblies.

The parents were informed about exemption rights at the beginning of each school year. Some of the teachers stated that as long as assemblies and other arrangements and activities were held at school, parents⁵ would not exempt their child, but they would claim exemption from the 'Christmas service' in the parish church. For a couple of years the Vice Principal had asked Tuva (a tutor for the pupils with a non-native-speaking background) to be responsible for an alternative arrangement taking place while the school community attended the 'Christmas service' (cf. Gjefsen 2005). In the first year of observation she told that this time, in the end, thirty-two pupils (a little less than 10 % of the pupil population) had been present at the alternative festival arrangement. The amount of exempted pupils was more than tripled compared with the year before. The second year, the group of exempted pupils was a little smaller but still it was more than double compared with earlier years. For the Easter assembly in the music room, there were some exemptions, but the numbers were not reported.

Remembering, interpreting and sharing thoughts about the future of the festival traditions

With slight deviations the interviewed teachers told the same story of how the annual collective festival assemblies had come to take the present form: The school community had a long experience of co-operation with the staff of the parish church about the 'Christmas service'. Christian remembered the 'old style' of 'the service' (cf. the traditional type below). Because the pupils gradually had become more noisy and inattentive, the school staff had wanted a change and taken more responsibility for the 'Christmas service'. This was how the 'festival committee' (FC) had come into being. As a consequence whole cohorts and smaller groups of pupils were now contributing to 'the service'.

Christina did not report of any breaks in her long service in the FC. She kept her position there the second year of observation. Other members in the second year were Anna, Siv Carina and another young female music teacher. Christina thought most of her colleagues would not volunteer for this job, and despite the fact that it meant a lot of extra practical work she found the content and the values it involved too important to ask for a less strenuous task. According to Christina, for some years the collective Advent/Christmas traditions at Coaston had consisted only of the final day 'Christmas service' and the 'singing around the Christmas tree' (without the collective Advent assemblies). This was because, even earlier, more extensive traditions had exhausted the staff.

Ellinor had been a member of the FC together with Christina and Christian the year the present Principal had been appointed. Although young Ellinor could not remember details about the decision making, there had been a change in the style of the Advent assemblies that year. The FC had decided that there should be a tight structure, but within it the performing teachers and pupils should have considerable freedom of action. Ellinor appreciated this agreement and thought the rest of the staff was pleased about it as well. None of the interviewed teachers reported any dissatisfaction. Christina, however, acknowledged that if there were discontented colleagues, they would probably not tell her about it. She thought that changes were being introduced 'from above', i.e. from the central political level of the school system. She referred to the coming substitution of the compulsory school's long established 'Christian and ethical' general objects clause with an objects clause representing a broader value basis (finally decided in December 2008), and this made Christina uneasy. "It's a pity to let go of all our culture", she said.

Several of the teachers expressed their hopes and expectations that the school's festival culture would continue more or less as it was. When asked about the possibility that collective assemblies could contain elements from other major cultural traditions than the Christian-Humanistic, all the answers were negative. Festivals of other religious and cultural traditions might have a place on the cohort level depending on the background of the pupils. Only the Principal was a little more open in this matter. She acknowledged that she had some power with regard to the future festival culture. However, she respected the school's traditions and acknowledged the influence of quite a number of staff who held a Christian philosophy of life. She agreed with her staff on the policy that Coaston should have a culture of singing⁶ and of pupil performances. She was pleased that some of the collective assemblies gave her opportunities to promote the Christian-Humanistic liberal values she saw as the school's foundation and she believed in.

Several of the teachers involved in Coaston's collective assemblies, welcomed opportunities to back up values they believed in. Anna's chosen theme for her Advent contribution the first year was 'our responsibility for the environment/the creation' of which she talked with commitment. Sara had gradually built up her status as an oral transmitter of Christian cultural festival texts during collective assemblies and performed at both the observed 'Christmas services in church'. Siv Carina was likewise demonstrating her dramatising skills but choosing content from the central biblical Christmas story. Eva, who was responsible for religion and life view education for the two groups of nine-year-olds the two years of observation, was also a music teacher and as such actively involved in the collective assemblies both years when her enthusiastically conducted choirs of young pupils were singing modern, rhythmic songs of Christian beliefs and values. The second year Eva came up with the idea of performing an Easter musical instead of inviting the local youth minister on the last day before the Easter vacation. Without much extra work and re-using resource material from her earlier teaching experience, she took a central position in Coaston's festival culture this year, relieving her colleagues in the FC.

Comparison and discussion

In my earlier research on the development of 'school services in the parish church' I constructed three types, called the traditional, the modern and the late modern 'school service'. The distinctive mark of the first type was the dominant position of the minister as liturgical leader and preacher and the corresponding passive 'assembled' pupils and teachers except for singing traditional hymns. The Principal often gave a little speech at the end of the service, thanking the minister for a good relationship and reinforcing taken-for-granted Christian-Humanistic virtues and values. The characteristics of the second type were more pupil performances and often a dramatising in addition to the minister's sermon. God's love and the value of caring were the central ideas transmitted in both these types. The third type was different because it showed more plurality with regard to form and content. Pupils, teachers, and even the minister, were involved in a variety of performances of singing, playing instruments, dramatising, dancing and addressing the 'audience' who in turn gave spontaneous applause. The ideological messages within a single 'school service' of the third type could involve a spectrum of nuances, from the joy of gifts and Christmas decorations to an address by a teacher emphasising a volitional responding to God's goodness. All though there was overlapping of characteristics between the three types with regard to the three

periods of research (1992, 1998 and 2005), the observations in the early years of the 21st century did not include the first type (Haakedal, 2007, 42).

With a fourth period of observations (2007-2009), I will discuss some contrasting and shared interests of individuals and groups at the various levels of organisation of the major institutions involved. As an introduction to this discussion, I will briefly describe Flaten's 'Christmas service' as a contrast to the 'Christmas services' for Coaston. While the youth minister interacting with Coaston led the two services in a concise but everyday language, the minister conducting the 'Christmas service' for Flaten seemed to stress the liturgical language. The climax of this service was an extended dramatisation of the Nativity story with large props and exquisite costumes. Pupils played the main parts but also teachers were involved in prominent, but generally silent roles. However, the minister's voice was clear, both with regard to form and evangelical message. Coaston's 'Christmas services' did not have one climax but rather consisted of rows of performances by individuals and small groups. Each voice, whether a pupil choir, a splendid storytelling teacher, or the minister's clear but matter-of-fact sermon, was part of a communication of and about Christian-Humanistic cultural heritage values.

Using Hervieu-Léger's definition of religion as a 'chain of memory', both schools' 'Christmas services' contributed to keeping up the chain. However, one minister used a voice of outspoken institutional religious authority while the other rather represented culturally adapting implicit religion. Both school communities interplaying with the two parish churches were involved in remembering by use of various cultural tools, but the degree to which each community was involved in 'collective' remembering was different. Placed along a continuous line between collective ('unself-conscious') memory and a (more or less consciously applauded) plurality of representations, Coaston was closer to the latter end than Flaten. I suggest that the way the FC functioned at Coaston, with a small group of teachers responsible both for the form and content of the school's festival assemblies, and negotiating with the Principal and among themselves, was one reason for the rather low-voiced minister. The Principal herself was also engaged in a direct administrative dialog with him.

I will then turn to another level of the organisational negotiations, this time with regard to the Coaston staff members involved in the collective festival assemblies. Through the interview with Christina, my impression was strengthened that she played a central role as a keeper of festival traditions. However, there were also signs that she felt the 'traditionally Christian' collective values threatened by the general secularising signals from the central school authorities. While Christina and more female teachers of her generation rather low-

voiced steadily worked in favour of 'collective Christian remembering', Christian spoke out for a 'high esthetical standard' with regard to the festival culture. The fact that Christian was not a member of the FC the second year may be a slight indication that a younger generation of teachers was becoming more influential. With her dramatising skills Siv Carina could communicate the central Christian festival stories in an engaging way. Being involved in dramatising was popular with the pupils and understood by Siv Carina as an effective way of learning. This form of multimodal presentation was also central to Flaten's 'Christmas service' and its 'Easter journey'. The latter collective event was conducted by a youth minister of a local free church while he simultaneously performed as story teller and director.

Storytelling and dramatising may be characterised as examples of creative teaching and learning methods. They represent one way of dealing with easily bored pupils almost demanding to be actively involved or to be sufficiently entertained to keep their interest. Persons with dramatising performing skills are thus at an advantage, whether they are employed by school or 'church'. School teachers may draw upon the resources of 'voluntary cooperating organisations'. Many teachers seem to experience their daily tasks as becoming more and more strenuous. Thus, there is 'a market' for experience oriented and involving educational techniques. The performance centred and entertaining forms and the spontaneous applauses in the schools' collective assemblies are part of this picture. However, some variations of these techniques may also be linked to habitual incorporating practices.

With regard to authority and ability to influence the development of a school's festival culture, there is an interesting interplay between the Principal and the involved members of the teaching staff. Without an active support from prominent staff members, it seemed difficult for the Principal to carry through substantial changes in Coaston's festival culture, even had she found this necessary. The appointment of a new Principal was likewise an opportunity for the involved teachers to introduce other elements in the festival traditions. Some of these elements may be seen as vulnerable due to general secularizing tendencies in Europe (Hervieu-Léger, 2006). With regard to changes in the Easter assembly from the first to the second year of observation, Coaston's Principal stated that the form was altered but the content remained the same, and that she could approve of this.

The sociologist Paul Connerton (1989) discusses ritual actions and commemorative ceremonies as forms of collective remembering where there is quite a strong element of what he calls habit-memory. Above I have focussed on two particular rituals, i.e. the Advent candle lightening ceremony and the early morning 'flag ceremony' on the 17th of May, each of them centrally placed in Coaston's two greatest collective assemblies. However, these ceremonies

are hardly controversial in the current Norwegian discourses about public school values and religion and life view education. Lightening candles may be interpreted in several ways. It is a common mediated action in many of the world's religious traditions. Although the lightening of the four lilac Advent candles is a Christian cultural tradition, it takes place in many Norwegian homes disregarding beliefs and religious practices. Some relatively recent seasonal 'candle songs' for Advent lightening ceremonies only refer to universal human values. Such songs were used during Coaston's assemblies. They may be seen as effective for social cohesion. Pupils with other cultural backgrounds than the Norwegian Christian-Humanistic may come to appreciate the implicit values.

There is an intriguing relationship between the place and status in Norwegian primary schools of 1) particular religious commemorative practices, 2) the nation's commemorative practices with the aim of constructing and sustaining a national identity, and 3) mediated action intended to support universal values of solidarity and caring. One may wonder what values Coaston's 17th of May morning ritual and parade in the first decade of the 21st century signal. The texts of the traditional patriotic hymns suggest a parallel between the freedom march of the Israelites through the desert to 'the promised land' and the traditional 17th of May parades cheering for the national freedom after the union with Sweden and when the WWII occupation ended. Coaston community only sang a few verses from these hymns. Other songs seemed to underline the new life of spring more than political freedom. For the pupils the building of school identity – along with the general freedom motif – may be a preparation for life in a liberal democratic society. It is an honour for a pupil to be chosen to address his or her school community on the National Day. But general festival joy for new clothes and the freedom to buy sweets and hang around with family and friends is the main thing.

Through my years of observing schools' festival culture, some changes are obvious. There is certainly a current tendency of individualisation, for example connected with the right of exemption from arrangements like 'school services in church'. Part of an explanation of an increasing amount of pupils attending the 'alternative festival arrangement' instead of joining the 'Christmas service', I suggest is that more contemporary children will claim a right to decide for themselves, and the parents will let them. There are also more opportunities for gifted and ambitious pupils and teachers to perform in front of large audiences. So, in one way the Coaston case study backs up Hervieu-Léger's (2006) claim that the days of collective European Christendom are gone and instead a satiated, expressive individualism has taken over. However, in my study there are also elements which may correspond with her

concluding remarks about a future commemorative function of the European heritage, moving in a more integrative, mutually respecting direction. School rituals which formerly had a clear religious profile may now be interpreted in several ways, including a stressing of universalistic values. Even so, social cohesion would perhaps be better served if the minority pupils had experienced that elements and values from their background festival traditions were made more visible by being given some place within the school's collective festival culture.⁷

Conclusion

As for Coaston school community, the identity management of its cultural majority group, which included annual preparations for the Christmas and Easter holidays and for the National Day, was concretized through commemorative ceremonies with rather weak incorporated practises and productions of habit-memory. The bodily elements involved could be interpreted in several ways. The festivals at Coaston were handled through current negotiations between the involved staff members, the Principal and some representatives of parents and local institutional and 'communitarian' life. The differences between the collective assemblies of Coaston and Flaten, particularly the 'Christmas services', indicate (individual and group) negotiation possibilities for both school and faith organisations. However, the observations reported and discussed above seem to testify to a continued, though weakened, hegemonic character of Coaston's festival culture. A change in the direction of more multicultural collective festivity, which could perhaps support ongoing processes of social cohesion in a more respectfully sustaining way, seems to depend on a stronger 'mood for change' among the school's staff on behalf of the minority pupils.

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¹ '(Festival) school culture' is defined below. Schools and persons in the article have fictional names.

² The 'Bible-belt' refers to the coastal regions where traditional Christianity for a period of over a hundred years (ca. 1870-1970) had, and in certain respects still has, a stronger position than in the other regions of Norway (see Haakedal, 2004, 28-33).

³ See <http://www.utdanningsdirektoratet.no/>: 'Lover og regelverk' and 'Læreplaner'.

⁴ In 1997 the dual system of an open-ended Lutheran Christian education and an alternative 'life view education' (the latter at its peak covered ca. 4 % of the pupils) was brought to an end in the compulsory primary and lower secondary school (ages 6-12 and 13-15) and a non-confessional subject was introduced, called KRL (Nor.: Kristendoms-, religions- og livssynskunnskap). The Education Act of 1998 ('Opplæringsloven') was altered in June 2008 causing the name of KRL to be changed to RLE (Nor.: Religion, livssyn og etikk). The Nor. concept of 'livssyn' may be translated as 'life view', or 'philosophy of life'. A new syllabus for RLE was approved later the same month.

⁵ This would mainly be parents with a non-native-speaking background plus some belonging to religious minorities or the Norwegian Humanist Association.

⁶ Cf. Beckmann & Breistein's (2006) qualitative study, based on interviews with twelve teachers from six schools on the southern coast of Norway, concluding that primary teachers were much more hesitant with regard to singing Christian hymns and songs than a decade earlier. Coaston seemed to deviate from this pattern.

⁷ See the interesting presentation and discussion of Palestinian-Jewish school ceremonies in Beckerman (2004). Although this context is very different from the context of Coaston, a comparison of the different school cultures serves to focus the hegemony processes at work in the Coaston community.