

Marriage in Africa

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There are evolving customs and traditions relating to celebration of marriages in every human society, regardless of their relative primitiveness. Celebration of marriages or marriage ceremonies is to most ethnics and races, a customary rite of passage which every young man and woman must of necessity undergo as a pre-requisite to becoming full-fledged adults.

It is one of the areas where the uniqueness of a people and diversity of cultures come to fore. In some cultures, marriage ceremony is a one-day affair, in some, it is week-long, while in some, especially in Africa, marriage is celebrated in a series of ceremonies spread over several months or even in some cases, years. The rites to be performed, the pre-requirements, activities and the duration of the ceremonies vary from one culture to another.

There are more than 1,000 cultural units in Africa and each culture, each tribe, has its own wedding and marriage traditions, many of which can trace their origins back hundreds or even thousands of years. Rich African values and traditions find expression in the manner in which marriage is celebrated.

African traditional societies attach much significance to marriage as a form of social contract binding not just on the two individuals who are directly involved but also their families and in most cases their respective communities. Marriage is not just the creation of a new branch in a family tree but also the creation of a family bond between two independent families. Marriage in the traditional African society serves more than its primary purpose of procreation and companionship; it serves both political as well as socio-economic ends. It is not unusual for families to give out their beautiful daughters to the monarchs and the rich as a way of maintaining social relevance. Weaker communities encourage or force their daughters to marry into stronger communities as a way of fostering peaceful co-existence. Marriage also serves commercial purposes as there are localities where women are given out in marriage to the family creditor or his nominee as part of debt settlement arrangement.

In some part of Africa, it is customary for a woman to be married off without her consent and

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forcefully relocated to her husband's home. The consent of the woman's family is considered more important than the consent of the woman herself. Nevertheless, regardless of the circumstances of marriage, there is always a form of celebration to mark the beginning of the new union.

The reason for the celebration is not farfetched. Even in the early times, the manner in which a marriage was celebrated determined to a large extent the validity of the marriage as well as the rights and respect accorded either of the couple, especially the woman. All customary requirements had to be met as any leniency or indulgence on the part of the woman's family may affect the value that would be placed on her by her husband's family and the observing members of the society. In the Yoruba land, a lady given away in marriage without the fulfillment of the customary obligations, most important of which is the traditional bride price, is regarded as "Iyawo ofe" (a free wife). Such a wife commands little or no respect from the members of her husband's family and even members of the community as a whole. It is the prevalent belief that a woman 'properly married' cannot be subjected to abuse by the husband and his family as they would always remember that they married her at a huge cost. A woman married with all traditional requirements fully met has a higher social rank than one married through a defective process. While children from such cheaply married woman may not be tagged illegitimate outrightly, where the husband marries another woman properly (polygamy is more of a tradition) the children of the 'properly married' woman would be able to lay a more legitimate claim to their father's property and family titles.

Times have changed and a lot have happened over the past century to rid African societies of some of its obnoxious traditions and discriminatory practices, but much more, a lot has also happened to erode some of the rich cultural values that set the continent apart and trivialized what use to be regarded as significant. Largely responsible for this change is the advent of western education/civilization and religion.

The celebration of marriage in the contemporary African society is now a blend of African customs, western traditions and religion. Although most of the ethnic groups still retain some of their peculiar customary practices, there appears to be a general mode of celebrating marriage that cuts across the various societies / cultures.

Introduction:

This occasion is the first formal meeting between the intending couple's family where the

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marriage proposal is made by the man's family and all issues pertaining to the bride price and other requirements are discussed. At some point in the course of the ceremony, the principal members of both families may agree on a date for the main traditional wedding. Although, this meeting has become some sort of extra ordinary ceremony which is now being celebrated extravagantly, it is not the traditional wedding, but a mere pre wedding gathering to mark the formal engagement of the couple. The introduction ceremony does not confer a married status on the intending couple.

It is not unusual for an intending couple to break up after the introduction ceremony. When this happens, neither of the two families owe any obligation to the other as there had been no marriage between the estranged lovers. In some cultures, gifts already exchanged between the parties may be returned and in modern times, an aggrieved party may approach the court for a breach of promise to marry.

Traditional Wedding:

As earlier mentioned the families of the intending couple may at the introduction ceremony or afterwards choose a date for the traditional wedding. There are several traditions observed in the celebration of customary marriage in several parts of the African Continent. However, one of the essential requirements for the celebration of a valid customary marriage, which is common to most cultures, is the payment of the bride price by the groom's family. Customary marriage is a legally recognized marriage that confers a married status on the couple.

Religious wedding/Statutory marriage:

After the traditional weddings, most couple also celebrates their marriage in accordance with their religion's tenets. There are different religions represented in Africa. Many northern Africans, especially, have been influenced by Muslim traditions, while further south there are more Christian, Hindu, and even Jewish traditions interspersed with more ancient traditions. The Christian marriage is tagged 'white wedding' as same was gotten from the white missionary that brought the Christian faith and western education to the African Continent. This form of celebration is often merged with the celebration of the statutory marriage, provided the church has obtained the necessary accreditation from government as a recognized place of worship and the couple had prior to the wedding obtained the requisite license and approvals from the local marriage registry.

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Other organized religions too are able to conduct weddings in accordance with religious rites and at the same time confer the statutory marriage status on the couple. Otherwise couples who are interested in getting married under the statutory law may still have to attend a local marriage registry to be statutorily married.