

Nigerian 'I dos'

Weddings are fun and festive occasions all over the world, and every culture has its unique way of celebrating the ceremony of marriage. Read about the unique wedding customs of Nigeria, which present a curious mix of Western and Nigerian traditions.



In my tribe, if an Igbo man wants to marry an Igbo lady, he has to get all the items on the list,” begins Kingsley Okeke, my Nigerian co-worker. Intrigued, I lean in over the office desk and ask him to explain further. “Before a family gives away their daughter, they hand the man a list – a piece of paper with a number of different items, and if the man cannot get even one of the items, the girl’s family will never let them get married!”

This was my introduction to the fascinating customs of Nigerian marriage proposals and wedding ceremonies. Despite growing Western influence in Nigeria, the culture has maintained many of its customary rituals, including those having to do with marriage.

Wedding customs in Nigeria often depend on the tribe to which one belongs. While there are hundreds of tribes throughout the country, the three major tribes are the Igbo, who are largely concentrated in the southeast region of the country, the Yoruba in the west, and the Hausa, a mostly Muslim tribe occupying the regions of the north.

Rituals for marriage proposals vary according to tribe. For the Igbo tribe, the dowry list provides a challenge that

forces the man to prove his love and dedication. “That list is so crazy!” says Kingsley. Apparently the list can include items as extravagant as a car or as difficult to obtain as the tooth of an alligator.

“Because of this, people from my tribe don’t get married early,” Kingsley explains. “The customary thing is that people graduate, they work, and they try to make some money. And when they are rich enough to start a family, then they start talking about marriage.” This is very different from Western tradition where it is not uncommon for people to marry young. Kingsley is shocked that his 24-year-old American friend is already married. “He was still in university when he got married!” he exclaims. “This is crazy. ...this could never happen in my tribe.”

Also in Igbo culture, men are not allowed to marry until their older brothers have already done so. Deferring to the elder sons is seen as a sign of respect, although Kingsley, who has one older brother, jokes that he often argues about this custom with his mother.

For the other tribes, proposal customs are quite different. While the Yoruba don’t have any particular feats to overcome to prove their dedication, the



Hausa tribe in the north must suffer physical pain: if a Hausa man wants to marry a girl, he must endure a flogging of about one hundred lashes to prove his commitment. “He has to take everything,” explains Kingsley. “Even if they are on the ninety-ninth stroke and the man protests, they will not allow him to marry the girl. But if he takes everything, the wedding can proceed.”

In Nigeria, marriages between people of different tribes are not common. In the past, if a man and woman from different tribes wished to wed, they would have to elope and do so in secret. However, these days, things are slowly changing and people are more open to the idea of inter-tribal marriage. “It isn’t generally accepted,” says Kingsley, “but people are more open to it now than in the past.”

There are two distinct types of wedding ceremonies today in Nigeria. In the cities, most people have “church weddings,” which are quite similar to the typical Western wedding – a priest conducts a ceremony and the bride and groom stand in front of the church to exchange rings and vows. In the villages, however, weddings are far more traditional and typically “Nigerian.” In traditional weddings the bride and groom often participate in a ritual in which they drink from the same cup of palm wine. “The lady is given a drink,” says Kingsley, “and then she’ll go around the whole place looking for her husband to give him the drink

as well.”

Despite these interesting customs, many aspects of Nigerian weddings are quite similar to typical Western weddings. There are bachelor parties, wedding ceremonies with friends and family, and wedding receptions with lots of music and good food! While chicken and fried rice and common party foods, cow is often served at weddings, as cow meat is reserved for the most special of occasions.

When I ask if there is dancing at the receptions, Kingsley claps his hands together, and laughs heartily. “Oh, Nigerians love to party!” He says that the Yoruba in particular are crazy party people. “They party all night and they make noise. ... They’ve got these hour-glass shaped drums, called ‘talking drums,’ and they hit them so loud, and everyone is jumping up and down.”

The traditional wedding attire also varies from tribe to tribe. Kingsley shows me photos of wedding attendees, and I notice that women are dressed in colorful full-length gowns and are wearing matching headdresses. Some of the men’s outfits resemble long robes, while others are loose-fitting shirts and matching trousers. As we peruse the photographs, I can’t distinguish among the different styles, but Kingsley easily identifies the tribe to which each man and woman belong simply based on the clothing and headwear. While the differences are subtle, the tribes maintain their strong identity through their



dress, which is easily recognized among Nigerians.

Finally, I ask Kingsley about his own experiences at Nigerian weddings and he describes the most unique of the customs thus far. “We like to spray money,” he says. I stare at him blankly. Spray money? He smiles and continues. “Someone, most likely the bride, dances and everyone throws money on her! Only ladies and children get sprayed with money, seldom does a man get sprayed.”

Apparently, “spraying money” is a uniquely Nigerian tradition, and I’m completely intrigued. I ask, bills or coins? “No, not coins!” Kingsley says laughing, “bills, bills. . . . lots of money! We do this at all parties – weddings, funerals, regular parties.”

Kingsley says that while Western influences have begun to affect wedding traditions over the years, funerals remain distinctly and fiercely Nigerian. As I listen, I can’t help but think that if weddings are this interesting, what cultural spectacles Nigerian funerals must be. . . .

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