**Nigerian Wedding Traditions**

Nigerian nuptials come with the fantastic opportunity to have up to three different wedding ceremonies, with a choice of civil, religious and traditional ceremonies.  Of course a couple could choose to have just one or two, but it’s possible to have all three if you can afford it!   Whichever you choose, each brings that legal bond as well as a highly festive and colourful celebration in true flamboyant Nigerian style!

Of course, like other parts of Africa and South Africa, Nigeria is a vast place and there are many separate traditions which are exclusive to different areas, so the wedding rites and costumes may vary across locations.  If you are marrying, or attending a wedding in a specific area of Nigeria, do seek advice from those who know the local customs.

**The Price of Engagement**

What the western world regards as an engagement period is often regarded as part of the actual marriages rites in some parts of Nigeria and can be a very formalized period of literal negotiation of the bride’s “worth”, followed by a significant period of fun and celebrations. Local officials and elders will oversee negotiations to agree the bride’s “price.”

Now, although this might sound distasteful, it’s useful to remember that this is an ancient custom and that the bride can be closely involved in this.  Her “price” often includes gifts and offerings such as textiles, shoes, clothes, jewelry and bags.   Like her Moroccan sisters, a Nigerian bride-to-be can find herself showered in gifts as the negotiations for her hand hot up!   In some areas, this tradition is taken more seriously, whilst in the more modern cosmopolitan areas of Nigeria, this custom is likely to be played out as a fun way of passing over gifts and as a prelude to the engagement celebrations. Avoiding this custom altogether does not make the marriage less legal, it just mean less goodies for the bride! Once an agreement is reached, the gifts are passed on to the bride’s family and celebrations, as well as preparations, begin.

In other parts of Nigeria, this whole negotiation period may be initiated by the suitor visiting the bride’s family.  He presents a formal letter requesting his bride’s hand in marriage on a set date and then those negotiations and gift passing proceed, along with dancing and celebrations.  The groom then returns on the evening before the wedding day to see if the wedding can go ahead!

In other Nigerian cultures, such as the Igbo culture, the bride’s family gives the suitor a list of different items.  In order to earn his bride’s hand in marriage, he must gain all of the items on the list for them – and this list can include items as diverse as a car and an alligator tooth!

As with many cultures, the bride-to-be enjoys a period of female company and cleansing, before the ceremony.  For a traditional wedding, she will be helped to bathe and prepare herself and will have Henna decorations to her hands and feet.

**The Wedding Ceremony**

One of the major foundations of Nigerian marriage is the blood tie which this brings between families.   Particularly as wealthy urban and cosmopolitan areas of Nigeria have started to hold more westernized church weddings as something of the “norm” it’s important to remember the traditional beliefs which lie beneath, so if you do have the chance to include an aspect of the traditional into your Nigerian wedding, this is considered to be respectful.

♥ A civil wedding may be held in a civil building or hotel.  This is likely to include the westernized wedding formalities, such as signing the register.

♥ Religious weddings include full church weddings of the Nigerian Church or Christian Church, following the influence of missionaries from centuries ago.  Traditions of wearing vibrant colors and singing in praise and celebration might form a significant part of these weddings, although the wedding rites will be faith-based rather than based on traditional African rites.  Ceremonies in many local, urban areas have been westernized to now include a traditional ceremony, followed by a westernized church weddings, particularly where the families share the Christian faith.

♥ One version of a traditional African wedding involves the bride being taken off to her groom’s village amidst lots of singing and dancing from her relatives.  She is placed in a ceremonial hut where she has to stay whilst her groom distributes chicken and tobacco amongst the guests.   Once this is done, the groom can enter the bride’s hut and the wedding is announced as, ahem … formalized!  The following morning, a goat is killed and its blood is spread on the threshold, to represent the new blood tie between the families.  The bride must then reveal to her mother whether she is pleased with her groom! Then dancing will begin and drumming starts to call the guests back to the celebration.  Pennies are passed to the bride, in return for a peek at her face and she is offered pennies in return for camwood, which is used as a body rub.

♥   As well as exchanging rings, many local African customs require the couple to have their hands bound together with cloth or grass, to symbolize the new bond between them – the literal “tying the knot”!   In a reversal of the westernization of the African traditions, this traditional African custom of tying the knot is often now incorporated into American marriages, thanks to its role in many Afro-American marriages across the years.

**Afterwards? It’s all down to tradition …**

What happens after the wedding depends heavily on local custom.  However, with the bond between the families being the most important part of the process, all wedding celebrations include the opportunity for the two united families to eat, sing and dance together.  Traditional weddings will include tribal singing, whilst urban weddings may have live bands playing traditional music.  Either way, singing and dancing together is all part of the celebration.

After the wedding party, one of the traditions is for the bride to return back to her family home, her father’s home, to change her clothes. Whilst she’s there, her husband will arrive complete with all his family, to claim her and to take her off to start their new married life.

**Fabulous Nigerian Wedding Fashions**

Traditional Nigerian weddings include colorful clothing and elaborate headdresses.  A traditional Nigerian bride will usually wear an ornate beaded headpiece, necklaces and ankle bracelets.

Tribal hair braiding is also very traditional and all of the women attendants, as well as the bride herself, are likely to have striking hairstyles for the celebrations, as well as those henna decorations to their bodies.

Tribal clothing is very important, both in traditional village weddings, but also in the “dressing up” for a more westernized church wedding. Tribal ancestry can easily be identified by the headdresses and robes of the guests.  Women usually wear bright colored, full length gowns and headdresses, whilst men may wear long robes or outfits of long, loose fitting shirts and matching trousers, as well as headwear.