

ORIGINS OF MARRIAGE CUSTOMS:
AN ANALYSIS OF RELIGIOUS TRADITIONS

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ORIGINS OF MARRIAGE CUSTOMS:
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TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	iii
LIST OF FIGURES	v
ABSTRACT.....	vi
INTRODUCTION	1
REVIEW OF LITERATURE	1
Catholic	2
Protestant Christian.....	3
Islam.....	4
Buddhism	6
Judaism	7
Hindu.....	9
Civil Ceremonies	12
Borrowed Traditions	12
RESULTS	14
CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION.....	19
REFERENCES	20

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure	Page
1. Figure 1	15
2. Figure 2	15
3. Figure 3	16
4. Figure 4	16
5. Figure 5	17
6. Figure 6	17
7. Figure 7	18
8. Figure 8	18

ABSTRACT

In almost every culture throughout the world, marriage is major milestone. Marriage ceremonies vary depending on many factors, including but not limited to: religious affiliation, geographical region, personal preferences, and cultural traditions. This study focuses on Harris County, Texas, home of the fourth largest city in the United States: Houston. Specifically, this study explores the most densely populated religious groups in Harris County, which include the Catholic, Protestant Christian, Islamic, Buddhist, Jewish, and Hindu faiths for the reason of analyzing the marriage traditions associated with the religious affiliation. The study also describes the different traditions included within civil ceremonies, those with no religious affiliation, and traditions that are widely practiced. The origins of all these traditions and their evolution are also reviewed. Wedding professionals in the Houston area would greatly benefit from understanding the basic customs of the different groups in order to offer more comprehensive and thorough services. The study resulted in the creation of sample mood boards for each religious wedding type to demonstrate the use and application of the study for wedding professionals, specifically wedding planners, who will be involved in the planning and execution of similar ceremonies.

INTRODUCTION

In 2016, the average cost of a wedding soared higher than it has ever been in the past, at \$32,329, and the wedding industry overall brought in \$72 billion in revenue (Schmidt, 2016). Because the wedding industry is so huge, it is important for future wedding industry professionals to understand the different types of ceremonies and traditions associated with them. The most common types of wedding ceremonies include religious ceremonies such as interfaith ceremonies, civil ceremonies, and same-sex ceremonies. This study focused on religious ceremonies and the traditions/beliefs associated with them for the purpose of wedding professionals gaining an understanding of religious traditions. Understanding the traditions may help ensure clients' confidence in the professionals they hire and help professionals build a business with a more diverse client base. The geographical region used for this study is Harris County in Texas with the focus being on the Houston metropolitan area. The religions with the highest volume of followers in that area were selected. In addition to religious groups, the study also discusses civil ceremonies and traditions that are generally practiced, but may have been borrowed from their culture of origin.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The research study focused on the most relevant and populated religious groups in the Houston area. According to city-data.com, the Catholic Church is the most populated church in the Houston area, followed by Southern Baptist and many other protestant Christian faiths (2012). For the purposes of this research Protestant faiths are grouped together due to their similar practices. The next most populated religious group in Houston is Muslims, or people who practice the Islamic faith. Although they have less

followers in the Houston area, Buddhism, Judaism (specifically Reform and Conservative Judaism), and Hinduism are important religions to discuss. These are the faiths that will be focused on for the remainder of this paper.

Catholic

Usually, a traditional Catholic wedding includes a full mass, which is the typical Catholic church service, however, it is up to the couple to opt for a shorter service if they please (Roney, 2013). According to Schaer (2017), during the ceremony, guests, typically family members, will often read biblical passages. The reading of the passages is called Liturgy of the Word, and the passages are chosen by the couple and must be approved by the priest officiating the wedding. Following the readings, the priest gives a short sermon before the vows take place. The congregation will stand during the vows, which, according to Roney, are this: “I, ___(name)___, take you, ___(name)___, for my lawful wife/husband, to have and to hold from this day forward, for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and health, until death do us part” (2013). Schaer discusses that after the couple confirms the vows with the statement “I do,” they will exchange rings. As previously mentioned, there may either be a full mass or not. If the ceremony does not include mass, it will conclude after the exchanging of rings. If the ceremony does include mass, there will be a communion and blessing of the couple before the conclusion of the ceremony. It is important to note that in the Catholic church if a child or minor takes communion it is okay for them to have the wine, because they will not use juice. If the bride pleases, she may place flowers on a shrine to the virgin Mary either before or after the ceremony (Schaer, 2017).

Protestant Christian

There are many denominations of Christianity. Therefore, there is no single way to perform a Christian marriage ceremony. These ceremonies vary depending on the denomination and can be modified to suit the specific needs of the couple. There are thousands of Christian denominations, however only 35 denominations are the most popular in the U.S (Procon.org, 2018). The reason for the denominations is based in translation and interpretation of the bible. While each denomination is slightly different, they all have faith in the most basic belief that make them Christian, the story of Jesus Christ. While ceremonies are, in a sense, customizable to fit the couple, there are a few things that according to Bowman (1952) are common to see in Protestant Christian marriage ceremonies.

One element that must be included in order for the marriage to be official is what Bowman describes as consensus. Consensus is the couple's agreement to be married, most commonly expressed by saying the words "I do" or "I will." Bowman (1952) expresses the importance of consensus by describing how "It is this consensus, not the minister, the state, or the church, which marries the couple" (p. 41).

During most Protestant marriage ceremonies, the bride and groom will hold each other's right hand. Bowman describes the reason for this is when the couple shares physical contact there is no longer a "barrier" between them and they are more connected to each other. The act of holding hands can also symbolize the unity of the couple (1952).

The vows for a traditional Protestant wedding are easily recognizable to most modern Americans, as these are what we often see/hear in the media. As previously mentioned, in a Protestant ceremony the couple may make minor changes to better suit

their needs, leading to variations in the vows. However, Bowman (1952) explains that, traditionally, the officiant asks:

“Wilt thou have this Woman to thy wedded wife, to live together after God’s ordinance in the holy state of Matrimony? Wilt thou love her, comfort her, honor, and keep her in sickness and in health; and, forsaking all others, keep thee only unto her, so long as ye both shall live?”

The Groom will then say:

“I (name) take thee (name) to my wedded Wife, to have and to hold from this day forward, for better for worse, for richer or poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, till death us do part, according to God’s holy ordinance; and thereto I plight thee my troth.”

The bride will take the same vows (Bowman, 1952). Bowman explains that the vows described above contain basic statements, suggesting that (1) the marriage is religious, (2) it is a relationship only between the husband and wife, (3) the two accepts the other person as they are, (4) they will continue to love/respect one another even through hard times, (5) they may need time to adjust, (6) they will continue to make an effort to maintain a successful marriage, (7) and that the marriage is a lifelong commitment (1952).

Islam

For Muslims, marriage is an obligation in the religion as it is seen as “a contract between the couple and Allah” (Schaer, 2017). According to Schaer, the only real requirement for Muslims to be married is the couple signing a “marriage contract.” Otherwise, there is much variation between traditions because there is no specifically set

way to perform a wedding.

Mahr (meher) is a statement of the monetary obligation the groom will give to the bride, which is laid out in the marriage contract. This usually includes two parts, one given at the ceremony and the rest paid out over her lifetime. In modern Muslim marriages, most couples will use the ring as the first part of the Mahr, because it is a gift presented during the ceremony. For the deferred part, Schaer gives examples of “money, land, jewelry, or even an education” (Schaer, 2017). A marriage contract is signed during a Nikah (marriage) ceremony, in which, according to Rizvi (n.d.), the woman should say the words “I have given away myself in Nikah to you, on the agreed Mahr. The man must then say to her “I have accepted the Nikah.” By saying these words to each other, the two become husband and wife. Muslims believe the Quran should not be translated because it is the literal word of God and translations result in variation which could deter from the original, therefore these words must be said to each other in Arabic, and if the couple is unable to speak the words in Arabic, two people may say the vows for them, reciting in Arabic (Rizvi, n.d.).

Although a marriage ceremony may take place anytime, there are specific times, according to Rizvi, when it is not recommended to perform a marriage ceremony (n.d.). These include any days during the astrological sign of Scorpio, “during the last two of three days of the lunar months,” and Wednesdays. Marriage is also discouraged between the first month of the Islamic Calendar, Muharram, and the 8th day of the third month of the Islamic calendar, Rabi al-Awwal. Marriage ceremonies are not recommended to take place during any time of mourning that is observed by Muslims. During these times, it is discouraged to get married, however a wedding may take place at any time as long as all

parties agree to it and anyone in mourning will be able to perform their duties.

Buddhism

According to buddhistmatrimony.com, Buddhist marriage is more of a personal decision as opposed to a religious duty (2018). They prefer to have a very simple wedding (ayushveda.com, 2011). The couples may decide whether or not to have the ceremony in a temple or not, because marriage is not considered a sacred ceremony (“Traditional Buddhist Wedding Ceremony,” 2014). Although there are not specific religious requirements, there are traditions that may be included in a Buddhist marriage ceremony, depending on the couple’s choice. There should be a shrine dedicated to Buddha set up with candles, incense, and flowers (2018). Ayushveda.com explains that there should be, with the shrine, a set of two candles for the couple to light, symbolizing the unity of the families (2011). The shrine, along with its offerings and prayers, are an attempt to receive blessings from the Buddha for their marriage and future (Saral Marriage, 2017). Another important thing to remember is if the ceremony is held within a temple, all guests should remove their shoes upon entering the room where the ceremony will take place (“Traditional Buddhist Wedding Ceremony,” 2014).

The couple will often place flowers with Buddha’s image in offering before exchanging vows. Technically, the only requirement of a Buddhist marriage is the vows. The vows are written for each to recite to one another and come from the Sigilovdda Sutta (buddhistmatrimony.com, 2018). The groom’s vows are: “Towards my wife I undertake to love and respect her, be kind and considerate, be faithful, delegate domestic management, provide gifts to please her.” The bride’s vows are: “Towards my husband I undertake to perform my household duties efficiently, be hospitable to my in-laws and

friends of my husband, be faithful, protect and invest our earnings, discharge my responsibilities lovingly and conscientiously." After the vows, the parents or guests bless the couple by reciting the Mangala Sutta (buddhistmatrimony.com, 2018). The bride and groom may elect to exchange rings, and the ceremony is concluded. After the ceremony, there is a reception held including music, dancing, and a meal ("Traditional Buddhist Wedding Ceremony," 2014). Although not all Buddhists are vegetarians, the majority of Buddhist weddings will feature a vegetarian meal because Buddhists believe in being peaceful and not harming animals (Saral Marriage, 2017).

Judaism

The Jewish faith believes marriage is about two people publically declaring the relationship in front of the community (Berman, 2004). The Jewish matrimonial ceremony begins with distinct traditions. According to Rosenberg, before the ceremony can begin, two witnesses must sign the ketuba/ketubah. The ketuba, a marriage contract similar to a pre-nuptial agreement, offers protection for the bride, outlining duties of physical and spiritual needs that the groom will fulfill for his wife. The witnesses must be two people, man or woman, who are Jewish and not related to the bride, groom, or each other (1994).

After signing the ketuba, Rosenberg explains the bride and groom are escorted to the huppa/huppah for the ceremony. The huppa is a rectangular canopy, typically decorated with fabric and/or flowers, under which the bride and groom stand during the ceremony (1994). According to Adler and Grunwald, the huppa was historically held by hand at each corner, however in a modern Jewish wedding, it is more popular for it to be a stationary structure that stands on its own (n.d.) Once the bride and groom are

underneath the huppa, the ceremony can begin with a specific order to the ceremony. First, the rabbi opens with an invocation and personally address the bride and groom. After the opening words, the bride and groom will both drink from a cup of wine, which symbolizes the marriage intentions of the couple. Next, the groom will give the bride a ring and recite the words “Be consecrated unto me by this ring according to the law of Moses and Israel” (Rosenburg, 1994). If it is an Orthodox ceremony, the bride will not place a ring on the groom’s finger, but if it is a Reform or Conservative ceremony he may elect to. Conservative and Reform Judaism are denominations, similar to the ones of protestant Christianity, which vary depending on interpretation of the holy text. After this, the “seven benedictions,” which may vary slightly depending on denomination, are said over another cup of wine (1994). These words include:

May You gladden the beloved as You did gladden your creation in the Garden of Eden in days of yore. Blessed are You, Lord, who gladdens the bridegroom and the bride. Blessed are You, Lord our God, King of the world, who has created joy and gladness, bridegroom and bride, rejoicing, song, pleasure, and delight, love and brotherhood, peace and fellowship. Soon, Lord our God, may there be heard in the cities of Judah and the streets of Jerusalem the voice of gladness, the voice of the bridegroom and the voice of the bride, the jubilant voice of bridegrooms from their nuptial canopies and of youths from their feasts of song. Blessed are You, Lord, who gladdens the bridegroom together with the bride.

After these words are spoken, they drink the wine. The groom then stomps on a glass with his heel, a gesture originally intended to insure good fortune for the couple (1994).

The glass should be wrapped in a cloth in order to contain broken glass shards. There are many reasons to perform this action. According to Diamant, the first is that the marriage is a covenant with God that is not solidified until the glass is broken. The fragility of the glass also represents the fragility of the relationship, and breaks so that the relationship may not. It may also symbolize breaking hymen through sex, which is required of a Jewish wedding (2018). After Orthodox and Conservative ceremonies, the bride and groom are left alone in a room to consummate the marriage through intercourse (Rosenburg, 1994). It is important to note that this will take place before the reception, so there should be time allotted for this activity.

According to Shaer (2017), dancing is an important part of the reception after the ceremony. Karen explains that the Torah commands that Jewish people should be as joyful and cheerful as they would if it was their own special day, so wedding guests are expected to do just that, and dance as if it was their own wedding (2014). Specifically, the Hora dance in which the bride and groom are seated on chairs that guests lift up in the air. While the bride and groom are raised above the crowd, the guests dance around them in a circle. Another important thing to keep in mind is that the meal must follow the guidelines of the Kosher diet, meaning the caterer will need to be aware of this. Kosher foods meet certain guidelines that are required for Jewish people to eat. They are not allowed to eat meat and dairy during the same meal, and can only eat meats that are slaughtered in a particular way that is considered kosher (Fox, 2018).

Hindu

In the Hindu religion, marriages are arranged. According to Flood (1996), it is the responsibility of a man's family to find him a wife, and to arrange the marriage

ceremony. This is important because the couple may or may not know each other before becoming engaged or even married, therefore it is important to understand that the transition to marriage, for Hindu women, may be particularly stressful. For men, marriage marks the beginning of the householder's life in which he can gain wealth, experience pleasure (especially sexual pleasure), and fulfill his caste duties. On the other hand, for women marriage signifies the end of her childhood and the beginning of a whole new life with her husband (1996).

Hindus live according to the caste system, which places individuals in a certain social class, or caste, at birth. They may not switch between castes through their lifetime. Only through reincarnation (being reborn into another life) may a person switch to another caste. The goal is that after successfully completing all of the castes one may reach release and escape life on Earth. For Hindus to marry, caste compatibility is the most important consideration, although occupation, socioeconomic status, and astrological signs are also considered (Flood, 1996). Caste compatibility is the concept that one must marry within their caste. There are certain circumstances however, where a man may marry a woman of a lower caste than his own (Schwenz, 2014).

Hinduism has many marriage traditions that have remained throughout history. Celebrations used to last for several days but in modern days are typically fit into the night before and the day of the wedding ceremony. The Knot explains that before ceremonies begin there must be a blessing or prayer to Ganesh, who is the Hindu god of wisdom (2017). According to Flood (1996), the most common practice for a Hindu wedding begins with the bride's father giving her away to the groom and the groom's father. According to The Know, in order to do this, the bride's parents must perform the

ritual of Kanyadan, in which they wash the bride and grooms feet with water and milk. This is meant to purify the couple so that they may begin their marriage and the rest of their lives together. During the ceremony, there is a holy fire called agni (2017). Flood explains that throughout the ceremony, sacrifices will be offered into the fire. The offerings typically include some kind of food or herb (1996). In order to symbolize the couple's unbreakable bond the bride and groom will have their wrist tied with thread wrapped multiple times, because one thread may be broken easily but many threads form a much harder to break bond (The Knot, 2017). In order to symbolize fidelity, the bride must step onto the grinding stone owned by the groom's family. This represents their sexual relationship as a foundation for marriage. Together, the couple takes seven steps around the fire. Each step is for one of 7 sacred vows for the marriage. After this, the groom will present an offering into the fire. After all of the celebration is over, the bride will go live at the groom's family home and begin life as a married couple (Flood, 1996).

For a bride, henna is a huge part of the wedding day attire. Henna is a plant used for cosmetic purposes. The leaves of the henna plant are dried, crushed, and used to make a liquid dye. The dye is applied onto the skin in intricate designs that absorb into the top layer of skin, and can last up to four weeks (About Henna, 2018). According to Fabius (1998), henna is used in all rite of passage ceremonies in the Hindu faith, because it is meant to symbolize protection, luck, and wealth, and be a blessing to the individual. Traditionally, the darker the henna appears on the bride's skin, the longer the love/marriage will last. The application of henna should include prayers to the gods for a happy marriage. After the wedding, the longer the henna lasts, the luckier it is considered, so the brides may not do any housework until it is completely worn off in an attempt to

make the henna, and therefore the love in the marriage, last longer (1998).

Civil Ceremonies

Civil ceremonies are for those couples who don't have a religious affiliation, or have don't want a religious wedding. Civil ceremonies offer legal marriage that is completely customizable to suit the needs/wants of the couple. According to MacCarthy, civil ceremonies typically follow the basic structure that most of us are familiar with, beginning with a procession, exchanging rings, pronouncement of marriage, kissing, and ending with a recession (2017). There is much more freedom of customization involved in this type of ceremony than any other type of religious ceremony. Couples can elect to do different types of symbolic unity ceremonies, write their own vows, and so on. Most often, these types of weddings include what can be referred to as "borrowed traditions," which will be discussed in the next section, however they can be as non-traditional as the couple desires!

One fun thing specific to non-religious ceremonies is that anyone can officiate as long as they are ordained. This means that if the couple would like to have a friend or family member marry them, the individual would need to be ordained online and perform the ceremony. This type of ceremony is also great for couples who would like to get married outdoors or have a destination wedding, as it may be easier to find someone to officiate (MacCarthy, 2017). Overall, civil ceremonies offer the most freedom of customization to the couple, which is a big reason many couples will choose to go this route.

Borrowed Traditions

While some of the traditions previously discussed are specific to one group,

others are widely used by a variety of people regardless of religious affiliation. Many of these traditions begun as superstitious beliefs that were considered an offering to spirits. Although the traditions used to relate to superstitions, over time they have evolved. In modern weddings, most of these traditions generally symbolize good luck or avoiding bad luck (Bowman, 1952).

One of the traditions that has evolved over time and is widely used today is the throwing of rice over the couple as they are leaving. This started as a way for ancient Romans to appease evil spirits, and to increase fertility of the couple (Bowman, 1952). Over time, this tradition changed drastically. In modern weddings, rice is rarely thrown, but has evolved into throwing bird seed or confetti, blowing bubbles, lighting sparklers, etc. The only limitation is the imagination of the couple!

Almost every modern American, at some point, has heard that the bride should wear “something old, something new, something borrowed, and something blue.” This is a tradition that originated with ancient Jews. According to Bowman, wearing blue was originally popular because it represented “purity, loyalty, and fidelity” (1952). In modern times, the color blue still represents loyalty and fidelity, as well as quality.

According to Mooney, Ancient Romans believed that the 4th finger on the left hand was directly connected to the heart through a vein. Because of this, they called it the “vein of love,” and couples chose to wear rings on that finger in order to symbolize the two hearts being connected. Nowadays, it is most common to wear the rings on the same finger, the ring finger. Although some couples choose to wear it on the right hand, it is not nearly as popular in western cultures (2017).

Although it is not much more than a beautiful bridal accessory today, veils used to

serve a couple of functions. One of the ancient functions of the veil was to hide and protect the bride from evil spirits that may try to harm her. Veils were also used in arranged marriages, in order to hide the brides face until after all agreements were made. This way, the groom could not decide to back out based on physical appearance. In current modernity, they are an accessory that most brides still wear because of tradition, but have no longer hold particular meaning.

Another wedding accessory that evolved over time is the garter. According to bridebox.com (2015), the garter came about because of a belief that owning a piece of the brides dress would bring good luck, so guests would rip pieces of her dress off. In order to avoid this, the garter, worn on her leg underneath her bridal gown, was created. Typically, the groom will take the garter off during the reception and throw it to all of the eligible bachelors in the crowd. Whoever catches it gets the luck

RESULTS

As a demonstration of how the traditions discussed may be implemented or what they may look like, sample mood boards were created. The mood boards take the most important or prominent traditions from each religious group and display them in the form of images. This is a way to visualize what the tradition may look like, and can show overall, what a traditional religious wedding may look like. This information may be useful to wedding professionals who are involved with these types of weddings by serving as a reminder of what all should be included in the wedding. Of course they will have to discuss everything with their clients to be sure of exactly what they are looking to include in their wedding.

Catholic



Figure 1: Collection of photos related to Catholic weddings

Protestant Christian



Figure 2: Collection of photos related to Protestant Christian wedding

Jewish



Figure 3: Collection of photos related to Jewish weddings

Islam



Figure 4: Collection of photos related to Islamic wedding

Buddhism



Figure 5: Collection of photos related to Buddhist weddings

Hindu



Figure 6: Collection of photos related to Hindu weddings

Civil Ceremonies



Figure 7: Collection of photos related to civil wedding ceremonies

Borrowed Traditions



Figure 8: Collection of photos related to borrowed traditions

CONCLUSION & DISCUSSION

People spend thousands of dollars on weddings and plan their one perfect day for months, sometimes even years. When it comes to weddings, couples expect every tiny detail to be perfectly planned and executed. Because it has to be perfect, the couples expect the professionals they hire to be experts in their field and trust them to take care of every single detail. As clients expect perfection, professionals must provide perfection, even if they are not familiar with the clients cultural or religious practices. This study provided basic information about the most widely followed religious groups in the Houston, Texas area so that wedding professionals may have an understanding of the most important aspects of each type of wedding. Mood boards give a sample of what some of the elements of these weddings look like, and how they may be executed in a wedding. Although they are not all-inclusive, the most important parts are highlighted, and one may look at the mood board and remember what is important to include in the ceremony and wedding festivities. After understanding the basic elements of religiously or culturally diverse weddings, professionals may feel confident that they can plan and execute this type of event.

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