

Marriage Practices: A Comparative Analysis between the Chinese and the Yorùbá Ethnic Group

Abstract

Marriage is an institution that has evolved over the years to signify different things; while the traditional notion of marriage is starting a family additional habitual conception of marriage is to extend the family ties. Marriages across the globe differ based on their values, traditions, beliefs and their expectations. One certain phenomenon is that marriages involve a set of rituals and it differs globally.

This work adopts relevant secondary literatures that have delved into the conceptions of marriage practices across these two distant cultures. It draws out the unique differences and the similarities that exist and acts as a reference work for future research. This work sets out to identify key concepts and marriage practices between the Chinese and the Yorùbá race of Nigeria. It recognizes that there are fundamental reasons why people get married with inherent actors that are involved in the tying of the knot.

Keywords: Traditions, rituals, values, practices and society.

1. Introduction

The word “wed” is derived from the ancient Greek word for “people” and that is exactly what a wedding is, no matter what country it takes place in, no matter what culture it is part of. To wed is to pledge your-self to another and establish a new life as one (Dent 2004). A renowned scholar defined marriage as “a more or less durable connection between the male and female lasting beyond the mere act of propagation till after birth of the offspring” (Westermarck 1921). In his book *The Future of Marriage in Western Civilization*, he rejected his earlier definition, instead provisionally defining marriage as “a relation of one or more men to one or more women that is recognized by custom or law” (Westermarck 1936). Therefore, we can argue that throughout the world, marriage is regarded as a moment of celebration and a milestone in adult life. It is based on the premises of child birth and forging relations that the perception of marriage would be examined among the Chinese and Yorùbá race.

In China, marriage has different connotations; first it is seen as a social institution that directly connotes realistic and financial values, such as continuation of the family line (Magery 1972). Secondly, it is also seen as the development of communal networks (Ebrey 1991). Thirdly, it is perceived as the provision of old age sanctuary (Potter & Potter 1990). Furthermore, it is connoted as the transfer of financial resources (Croll 1984). Despite these scholarly interpretations of marriage in China, we also have the philosophical nuance of marriage from Confucius, the great Chinese philosopher, master and sage. Confucius defines marriage as:-

“The union of two different surnames, in friendship and in love, in order to continue the posterity of the former sages, and to furnish those who shall preside at the sacrifices to heaven and earth, at those in the ancestral temple, and at those at the altars to the spirits of the land and grain” (Su 1922).

While the institution of marriage pre-dates reliable recorded history, many cultures have legends concerning the origins of marriage. Therefore, the laws guiding marriage and the different cultural beliefs funneling marriages have changed over time. Various cultures have had their own theories on the origin of marriage.

In China for instance, the mythological origin of Chinese marriage is a story about the marriage of Nüwa and Fu Xi, who were once sister and brother respectively. This mythical story tells about how they invented proper marriage procedures after becoming married. At that time the world was unpopulated, so the siblings wanted to get married, but at the same time, they felt ashamed. So they went up to Kunlun Shan (Kunlun mountain) and prayed to the heavens, they asked permission for their marriage and said, if you allow us to get married please make a mist to surround us. The heavens gave permission to the couple, and promptly the peak of Kunlun Shan was covered in mist. It was said that in order to hide her shyness, Nüwa covered her blushing face with a fan. Nowadays, in some villages in China, the brides still follow the custom and use a fan to shield their faces (chinatraveldiscovery.com 2011).

In contrast with Chinese beliefs on the origin of marriage, the Yorùbá ethnic group also has many mythical stories on marriage. Furthermore, marriage ethics in this African society can also be traced back to Christianity despite the historical existence of such among this race. Although different cultures have different marriage customs, many of these traditions symbolize the same thing: the couple starting a new life together. Marriages in African societies was deeply

impacted and influenced by colonization of Africa by the west, it therefore exists as an institution that has been distorted though western ideologies and concepts (Ọmọṣọ 1998). One inherent difference is the traditional ways of marriage in Africa and western ideas about the concept of rearing children. Traditional methods of rearing children in Africa provides a suitable platform for which the child can thrive and learn the values of the society while the modern methods breeds a base for which the child develops independent attributes (Ajíbóyè, et.al 2012).

2. Comparison of Traditional Chinese Wedding and Yorùbá Wedding Practices

Comparable to other cultures, especially among the Yorùbá, Chinese wedding is considered as a union of two families. Once the bride and groom decide to get married or engaged, they should share the news with the parents. Information from the Chinese historical and cultural project states that:-

“Ancient Chinese wedding involves different stages; the proposal, the betrothal, the preparation for the wedding proper, the wedding day and the post wedding ritual” (chcp.org 2011).

Traditionally, arranged marriages were the dominant tradition in China for all centuries. Furthermore, Chinese arranged marriages often takes a more extreme form that can be found in other parts of the world and even among the Yorùbá. In China, many people experienced what could be called a “blind marriage” in which the parents monopolised the decision (with the aid of hired go-betweens), and the couple did not even meet until the day of the wedding (Xu & Whyte 1990).

The process is further explained as when the groom’s parents identified a possible daughter-in-law, they would send a go-between usually a married woman to present proposal gifts to the girl’s parents. If the proposal was well received by the girl’s parents, the go-between would obtain the girl’s birth date to be sent back to the groom’s family. The groom’s family would place the birth date on the ancestral altar for three days. If there were no misfortunes during the three days, the groom’s parents would give the groom’s birth date to the go-between to be brought to the girl’s parents, who would also go through the same process. At the same time, both parents would also consult their astrological experts for their advice on the potential

match. It is only when the outcomes are favorable, that the parents would proceed with the next phase which is the gift presentation and betrothal.

With the announcement shared to both parents, the two parents will then proceed with their discussion and gift presentation from the groom's parents to the bride's parents. Most of the time, the gifts will be presented in form of both food and money. The food items include tea leaves, dragon-phoenix cakes, and a pair of male/female poultry, sweetmeats, sugar and tobacco (Costa 1991). Tea leaves are the most essential item, this symbolizes wishes from the groom's family to the newly soon to be husband and wife for as many children and descendants as the tea leaves. In some areas these gifts are collectively known as *cha-li* which means tea presents.

It is customary for the girl's family to distribute the bridal cakes they received from the groom's family to friends and relatives as a form of announcement and invitation to the wedding feast. Those who received bridal cakes, were expected to present congratulatory gifts to the bride's parents. See figure 1 for a graphical illustration of what some of the cakes presented at Chinese weddings.



Figure 1 The dragon phoenix cake.

Several days after the presentation of gifts from the groom's family, the bride's family can send gifts of food and simple clothing or accessories to the groom's family (chcp.org 2011). Upon presentation of the gifts, the two families proceed to prepare for the wedding.

The wedding date is jointly selected by both parents. The groom’s parents usually take the lead to select a few auspicious dates, and then consult the bride’s parents who will determine the final date among those selected ones. Auspicious dates are usually determined based on the Chinese Almanacs. The almanac consists of predictions of luck, based on Chinese beliefs and interpretations, for the entire calendar year.

Figure 2 illustrates the luck prediction almanac used in selecting wedding dates in China.



Figure 2 The Chinese Almanac

Wedding invitations and envelopes are preferred to be printed on red paper. In the Chinese culture, red is the color of happiness. In Chinese culture, the newlyweds need to sleep in a brand new bed after they got married. The “new bed” holds an innocent implication that neither the bride nor the groom was ever married. This new bed is usually bought by the groom’s family, and the beddings by the bride’s family. After its delivered and set up before the wedding, this bed cannot be slept or sat on by anybody except babies and children. This practice denotes wishes for many children to come (Freeman 1970). There is no specific restriction or practice on the type or color of the bed that should be chosen.

A few days before the wedding, the bride’s parents send their gifts to the intended home of the bride and groom. This time, the gifts should include beddings of the new bed. The bedding list includes an essential bed comforter with a dragon-phoenix design as well as to red envelopes

to be placed underneath the bed. The red envelopes should be stuffed with money inside; the amount of money is flexible, as long as it ends with the digit 9. Nine in Chinese culture stands for long lasting (Lam Ping-fai 1986). On the day of the wedding, the groom and groomsmen will decorate the wedding car and drive to the bride's house where they will fetch the bride. At the bride's house door, the bridesmaids and wedding helpers will play games with the groom and groomsmen before letting them into the house. These games usually involve asking the groom questions about the bride to demonstrate how he knows her bride, doing push-ups to show his strength and singing songs to declare his love for the bride. The groomsmen are responsible to help the groom pass all game (Freeman 1970).

Also, on this day the "hair dressing" ritual of the bride and the "capping" ritual of the groom symbolize their initiation into adulthood and are important parts of the wedding preparations in China. The color red which is a symbol of joy is featured prominently in the clothing and other ritual objects pertaining to the wedding (Freeman 1970). As token of appreciation for the love and care the bride's parents have given her, the bride serves her parents' tea before the bride leaves the house on the wedding day. This tea ceremony is usually not too elaborate but also a ritual of a filial daughter. On the other hand, the tea ceremony to the groom's family takes place after the wedding ceremony and is much elaborate. The tea to the groom's family includes lotus seeds and two dates. The lotus seeds served together symbolize early arrival of children from the newlyweds (traditionalchinese-wedding.com 2011)

The newlyweds kneel in front of their parents when they serve this tea. A "lucky woman" will help the newlyweds to make the tea, hand the tea to the newlyweds, who will then serve it to the groom's parents. The groom's parents will return "red envelopes" to the newlyweds; usually consist of either money or jewelry. A red envelope is also given to the lucky women when each cup of tea is served (Capo 2013). This is repeated for each of the older family members as respect to them. Tea is usually not served to the younger brothers and sisters of the family because due respect as been given to their parents, instead a hug or hand shake will usually be done.

Dinner banquet is the most respected ritual of all. The highlight of the banquet is when the newlywed, along with their immediate families, goes around the restaurant and makes a toast with every guest. The path of this toast can start from the left or right side of all the guest tables,

but do not turn back in the path. Another tradition that is usually carried out during the banquet is for the groom to carry the bride around all the guest tables. This symbolizes the promise from the groom to take care of the bride for the rest of their lives.

A day after the wedding, the bride gets up early to honor the ancestor at dawn. It is only then that she is introduced to the groom's relatives and friends. As she kneels before each of the older relatives, she receives a small gift. The bride's parents-in-law give her a title according to her husband's seniority in the family hierarchy. Generally, three days after the wedding, the couple pays a visit to the bride's family home, where the bride is now received as a guest (Capo 2013). The above clearly illustrates the ritual, customs and the values of the Chinese during wedding ceremonies.

Yorùbá wedding incorporates many old wedding rituals, thus it leaves a lasting impression to everyone. Generally the customs and the tradition vary from one region to the other. For the purpose of this paper, the researcher would examine and reveal Yorùbá wedding traditions. The Yorùbá people reside in different areas of the world, mostly they inhabit in Southwest Yorùbá such as Òyó, Òṣun, Èkìtì, Ògùn, Lagos, Kwara and parts of Edo and Kogi states. This race also resides in Republic of Benin, Republic of Togo, Sierra Leone, Cuba and Brazil (Atólágbé 2012).

In the Yorùbá tribe, Orímóògùnjé et.al (2011) identifies that there were different types of marriages in the olden days and some of them are: Giving the gift to the groom, the eloping scheme, Marriage to seek help and Wife snatching. Each one of these themes would be examined. In Yorùbá custom, the act of giving of bride as a gift is conducted due to a multiplicity of reasons. The first reason is because of financial reasons; the bride family presumes the groom has the financial capability to take care of the bride. The second reason might arise because of health reasons, the bride might be unhealthy and the family might think the groom's family has the traditional medicine to take care of the bride. The third reason is due to strengthening of relationship or building of bonds between families. Families of deep ties tend to strengthen their bonds through marriages of their children mostly without their consent. The fourth reason is due to power status, some parents in Yorùbá custom give out their daughter to a powerful King or Chief.

The eloping scheme is usually designed by the groom to kidnap her bride and get married

to her without the consent of the *awon obi* (parents). This act of marriage nullifies the concept of good behavior in the Yorùbá custom, thus it is regarded as a scheme of bad values, behavior and tradition. The reason for eloping might also be due to the bad behavior of the girl. Some girls are wayward and they bring shame to their families, thus they are kidnapped to a faraway place where she is married off immediately. Sometimes, this action is known to the girls' family and in most cases it's unknown to the family. However, after a period of time, the groom comes back to apologize to the bride's family for such immoral behavior.

In Yorùbá custom, marriages might be conducted to seek help. This act is often carried out by herbalists or traditional doctors. In ancient time, people fall sick and consult them, when they heal a patient and she is a girl and the parents have no money to pay for his services, they fall into a dilemma. This dilemma of debt is often replaced by an offer to the herbalists or traditional doctors to marry the girl as a settlement for their debt

Snatching of the wife also exists among the Yorùbá tribe and this act involves a coordinated process of snatching of another man's wife and making her his wife (Orímóògùnjé et.al 2011).

Additionally, under this tribe, the ceremony takes place in three parts; it includes the introduction, the engagement, the actual wedding ceremony (church, mosque, and registry) depending on one's faith, and the wedding reception (Raheem 2001).

In pre-colonial Yorùbá society, marriages were considered contracted between two families. That is to say when a man and a woman attained the age of getting married, it was the duty of their parents to arrange for their marriage. On the one hand, the man and the girl did not know each other until the arrangement had been concluded. On the other hand, the man and the girl could get to know each other only through an intermediary called *alárinà*. The *alárinà* is somebody who knew the two families very well. The intended couple would go and talk at the *alárinà's* house. If they both agreed to be a husband and wife, it was the duty of the *alárinà* to report back to the parents of both the man and the girl. The parents would then arrange for *ìṭọrọ* (asking for the girls hand in marriage). The *ìṭọrọ* usually took place in one day; the parents of the man would arrange to meet the parents of the fiancée. They would take along with them gifts for the fiancée's parents which could include two gourds of palm wine, one jar of home-brewed

beer, kola nuts, *orógbó* (bitter kola) and some significant amount of money (Ògúnabòwálé 1979).

At the formal meeting of both extended families, they both get acquainted with each other's beliefs, values, and background. During this arrangement, the man's family gifts are distributed among members of the extended family; a lot of significance is given to this to solicit for their prayers for a happy marriage as well as to ensure the acknowledgement of the community that the lady now has someone she intends to get married to. Prayers or words like *Wón máa gbó, Wón máa tó, Wón máa d'àgbà*, which means "they will ripen, they will eat and not go hungry, they will grow old" is repeated, while the cola nuts, honey and sugar cane are shared (Àìná 1998). Their gift symbolizes happiness, peacefulness, unity and joy. Furthermore, during this time, each one says a prayer, or gives an admonition to the bride and the groom.

After the prospective bride and groom have decided on the date and time for their wedding, the groom's parents will make a formal approach to the bride's parents informing them about their son's intentions. The bride's parents are now expected to give their formal consent. This takes the form of a letter that is written by the groom's family to the bride's family (Sturgis 1997). The communicative style displayed in the writing among the Yorùbá is referred to as *ìtọ̀rọ̀ omọ* (asking for one's daughters hand in marriage) and the particular activity of going to 'ask for' is referred to as *gbígba létà* (the delivery of the letter of proposal). This is a planned but not necessarily a practice that is rehearsed before it is performed. The receiving of the letter is called *gbígba létà* often involves the preparation to host (usually feasting) those of the party of the suitor. The preparation may also include the passing of the parents-in-law's extended family or lineage, which are expected to be present at the event (Sàlámi 2005). This process is also known as the engagement ceremony for the new couples.

In some cases of the Yorùbá tribe, the engagement rite varies from one cultural group to another. One description of the rites comes thus. It usually takes place the day before the wedding depending on the religion of the families involved. It is the longest session of all, and most people look forward to attending this part. At the start of the ceremony, the groom dances in with his friends. He has to prostrate for every member of the bride's family including the youngest one. After this, the *Alága Ìdúró*, the standing master of ceremony (usually a female) who represents the groom's family, comes to beg for the bride. She is responsible in coordinating

the payment of the bride price – which is usually returned to the groom’s family. She also presents the items brought by the groom’s family to the bride’s family. She goes back and forth between both families, informs the bride’s family of proposal and reason for visit. After much deliberation, they decide to accept the guests (Sturgis 1997). The bride’s family spokeswoman is the *Alága Ìjòdókó* (sitting chairman), she represents and acts for the family in the discourse of the wedding introduction and the engagement (Atólagbé 2012). Figure 3 and Figure 4 shows the proposal, acceptance and the entrance of the groom.



Figure 3 The proposal and acceptance.



Figure 4 The groom typically makes his appearance by dancing in with his friends then proceeds to prostrate.

A lot of prayers are said at this time; also some items like yam, cola nuts, bitter cola, spicy pepper, honey, a ring and a Bible must be carried to the home of the woman and presented to the elders and the other members of the family. Each of these items has its own significance which serves as the spring board for prayers during the ceremony. For example, honey signifies sweetness into the home; short prayers like-

“This taste is to help the sweetness in the marriage to continue to spread. Remember to treat each other with respect and love to always have sweet words for one another” (Sturgis 1997).

This presentation is usually accompanied by a lot of fanfare, which is thought to be the domain of women since they are believed to be good at such presentations.



Figure 5 The engagement gifts.

The *Alága Ìdúró* knows the right thing to say, the right song to sing, and the correct bargain to make. Since this is a long session, it is made interesting by the singing, dancing, eating, and thorough investigation of the items presented, each having its own significance. After the items have been presented, the bride to be is now allowed to come out, accompanied by her female friends and the other wives in her father's family. Engagement vows and rings are exchanged, depending on the religion of the families involved, in place of a ring it could be a Bible.

Food and light refreshments are served and the program continues with a lot of music, dancing, drumming and light entertainment. At the end of the program, the bride, groom and

their families join hands as more prayers are said. This symbolizes a union, not only between the man and the woman, but amongst the entire families. The final day is the wedding proper called *Ìgbéyàwó*. There are two parts of this; the church or the mosque as the case maybe, and the reception or wedding banquet – food galore, this is the best part for most people and goes on till late in the evening (Àìná 1998). At the church, hymns are sung, prayers are said and the priest / pastor in charge of the ceremony give an admonition to the couple, before they exchange vows.

“This is significant because of the moving experience people go through that day. To the many marries guests, the ceremony is a re-enactment of their past nuptials, but for the new couple it is an experience marked by the fulfillment of the hopes they has cherished for many years” (Àkàndé 1991).

This service is usually short, but it is made interesting by the signing of the wedding certificate, lighting of the unity candle; which symbolizes the union of both families and the exchange of vows and rings. After the first part, everyone moves down to the site of the reception - usually a hall that has been arranged and decorated with balloons and flowers. A section tagged “high table” is prepared for the bride, groom, their parents, best-man, maid of honor, and the chairperson. At the reception there is some sort of hierarchy in the way people are seated and served. The older people get to seat in the best seats and they are served first. This is in line with the culture which places a lot of respect on the elders in the community.

After the reception, the bride and her family members go back home to prepare for her final departure to become a member of her husband’s family. At this time, her parents, siblings and friends gather together to reminisce about their time together with her. A lot of tears are shed and her parents continue to give her advice on how to live a happy married life. Later in the evening, the bride is escorted to her husband’s home by the older wives - *Ìyàwó’lé* in her fathers’ extended family. On getting there, she is received by the *Ìyàwó’lé* in her husband’s home. The occasion is however not complete unless her feet are washed with water before she is allowed entry into their home. This symbolizes some form of spiritual cleansing (Àìná 1998).

3. Findings

This research work has identified some key issues among the Chinese and Yoruba wedding tradition. Firstly, marriages in both societies exist to fortify both nuclear and extended family ties. Secondly, it has discovered that they both share deep rooted traditional beliefs and connotations. Thirdly, it has exposed that parents have a strong influence in marriage rituals in both societies. Fourthly, with modernization, both marriages have been susceptible to inherent changes, for instance in the Yorùbá tribe, the use of the *Alága idúró* and *Alága ijòdókó* are not traditional concepts but modern ones. Fifthly, gift presentations both exist in both societies with traditional connotations and significance.

4. Conclusion

Chinese weddings and Yorùbá weddings have a lot in common; traditionally the influence of the parents is overwhelming in both cultures. In ancient China and in Yorùbá under the Yorùbá tribe, we can see the influence of the middlemen or as the Yorùbá call them, the *alárinà* or *zhōngjiān* 中间 in Chinese culture. One important factor to state also is that both cultures have a rich set of practices guiding marriages in their culture. In Chinese culture, red is a significant color while among the Yorùbá, white holds more significance. Furthermore, both marriages have the responsibilities of child rearing and respect for the family members. Nevertheless, both weddings are fun and every culture has its unique way of celebrating the ceremony of marriage. The strong reliance on favorable astrological reading, an escalation of the color red and the apparent existence of the double happiness (囍) symbol makes the Chinese traditional marriage distinctive from the Yorùbá. In the same way, the fun exchange and play on words, singing, dancing and the abundance of food and drinks in the Yorùbá wedding makes it unmatched with the Chinese.

Naturally, there are differences between two or more societies since the culture is not the same; but in many ways it's better to look for the focal point. Both the Yorùbá and the Chinese practice traditional marriage and it is the best context for rearing children. Although this seems axiomatic to most people, many scholars have critique the accuracy of this concept. Accordingly, social scientist set out to test the hypothesis empirically. They discovered that the physical and

mental health, academic performance, social adjustment, and obedience to law were significant traits of children who were raised by their biological parents who live and are married together (Dent 2004).

One important observation also is that weddings in China were not based on love; marriage is seen as an important factor that aids the extension of family ties. Marriage in China is functional in nature and the Chinese patrilineal kinship system regarded the husband's foremost role in the family to carry on the ancestral line. Marriage in China was therefore based on continuing the family heritage than to please the individuals getting married (Baker 1979).

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