

Are Women Obsessed with ‘White’ Weddings? A Case Study at the Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology (KNUST), Ghana

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Received 8 December 2018

Revised 11 April 2019

Accepted 28 June 2019

Abstract: *The current study sought to explore into whether women are obsessed with ‘white’ weddings. It examined the various possible factors/variables attributed to this assertion. The researchers employed a qualitative case study approach to examine the phenomenon. Thirty single women at the Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology, Ghana were sampled using the purposive sampling technique. Interviews were conducted with the thirty single women with the assistance of a semi-structured interview guide. Content analysis technique was used to describe the responses of the research participants. The research findings indicated that, women are not actually obsessed with ‘white’ weddings but the concept of marriage itself is very essential to them. It was revealed that, women place a much value on marriage since it basically moves an individual from one stage in life to another. They furthered that, marriage is very important not just to them but to their parents, families and even society. To them, such lifetime commitment is very significant. Furthermore, the findings indicated that, women would forfeit the wedding ceremony but for certain factors such as legality of the marriage, and even the significance of the exchange of vows and rings where the traditional ceremony somehow overlooks.*

Keywords: *Weddings, Obsession, Women, Marriage.*

Introduction

Marriage is noted to be an esteemed institution in the society due to the numerous benefits it exudes. There is a bit difference between marriage and wedding. Marriage can be defined as the union between a man and woman who have gone through societal procedures for such purpose and hence, children born out are recognized as legitimate off springs of both parents (Nukunya, 2003) whilst a wedding is the ceremony where two individuals are united in marriage. The organization of weddings varies among societies and different cultural locations. In most wedding ceremonies, there is basically the exchange of marriage vows by the couple, presentation of a gift (offering, rings, symbolic item, flowers, and money) and a public proclamation of marriage by an authority figure. Special garments are often worn, usually white by the bride and the ceremony is followed by a wedding reception. Music, poetry, dancing, prayers or readings from religious texts or literature are commonly incorporated into the ceremony. Also, speeches from the groom, bride, best man, the father of the bride, the newlyweds’ first dance as a couple and the cutting of an elegant cake are also included in the wedding reception.

The marriage between a man and a woman is a special and very significant celebration of the natural continuity of life in every part of Africa. Weddings have forever being a significant and important celebration for many people around the world. They celebrate the binding love between two people and the journey into a new life together. Wedding has being the dream of women in their life cycle. Many women would even agree that ‘a wedding is the celebration of a lifetime and whether that celebration

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is a grand fete for hundreds or an intimate gathering of family and friends, it is a day when dreams come true” (Davis, 2000).

The feeling of a dream wedding as a necessity intensifies the lavishness of weddings every year and significantly, much money is committed into establishing a dream wedding (Otnes & Pleck, 2003). According to Coontz (2005), “weddings today are the first chance a couple get to announce to the world their chosen joint identity”. This implies that, the couple uses the wedding as an avenue to publicize that they are together now, and society should recognize them as one body. This idea of a joint identity encourages women to utilize certain popular trends to display this identity in the most unique way possible. To be recognized as married in our traditional societies in Africa, one must be engaged traditionally, thus go through some traditional rites. However, the influx of the white man’s culture into our African traditional societies has initiated a flamboyant and ‘white wedding’ which most pre-married couples want to experience as a marital ritual, placing less emphasis on the traditional rites.

To the knowledge of the researchers, women are known to be mostly concerned about white wedding ceremonies than the marriage itself. However, paucity of information exists to establish this fact. Hence, this study is conducted to ascertain the assertion; obsession of women with weddings and in this context, white and extravagant weddings. It sought to achieve this by finding out the perception of women about weddings; the aspects of weddings in which they are interested in, and how beneficial is a wedding to women.

Research Methods

Research Design

The study employed a qualitative Case study design to examine the phenomenon; Obsession of women with wedding. This was used to acquire and do an in-depth understanding and analysis of the phenomenon respectively.

Target population

The study was conducted with single women between the ages of 18-45 who are students from the Social Science Faculty and national service personnel at the Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology, Ghana. Much emphasis was placed on the national service personnel and the final year Social Science students as most of them will have thoughts on weddings and marriages after completion of the service and school respectively.

Sample size of the study

Due to time constraint and the nature of the study as an in-depth qualitative Case study, 30(thirty) single female students from the Social Science Faculty and national service personnel were selected. Out of the thirty (30) participants, twenty-six (26) were final year students while four (4) were teaching assistants. However, with regards to our age ranges, all thirty participants fell under the first category which was 18-30 while we recorded zero (0) participants for our second age range category which was the ages between 31 and 45.

Sampling technique

The purposive non-probability sampling approach was used to select the female participants for the study. This was used because of the interest in some characteristics like sex, ages, final year students. This helped to seek knowledge from the relevant subjects on weddings to achieve the purpose of the study.

Method of collecting data

With the help of an unstructured interview guide, in-depth face-to-face interviews were conducted with the research participants. This method was employed to delve into the opinions, beliefs and perceptions of the participants on wedding obsession.

Data analysis method

The content analysis technique was used to describe the responses of the research participants in relation to the purpose of the study. This was used to develop themes and sub-themes from the participants' responses on wedding obsession.

Limitations to the study

- This study is limited on the grounds of generalizability and specific characteristics of the research participants.
- Because it was conducted at a very small location with few students and national service personnel who does not represent the entire female population, making a general argument and conclusion is very difficult.
- Also, focusing only on students and not the wider community single females, can affect the validity of the findings.

Results and Discussion

Aspects of Weddings Women are Interested in and the Associated Reasons

White weddings include ceremonial elements such as procession, exchange of vows, exchange of rings, pronouncement of the marriage, kiss, the blessing of the marriage and the reception. These are usually performed in the church officiated by a pastor, a priest or an officiate. The ceremony is followed by a reception which may include food, music, dancing and other rituals like the cutting of the cake, the wine toast, the wedding garter and the first dance. The researchers engaged in the exploration of which aspect(s) of the wedding women may be interested in; these aspects we assumed have an influence on the obsession of weddings by women.

The Vows

Exchange of vows is considered as a basic element of a wedding; a solemn promise made to commit one to another. It is the verbal exchange of words between the couple that expresses the sincere promises they are making to each other regarding the intention for the marriage. Women describe these moments as a very pertinent one expressed before God, several witnesses, family, friends and loved ones.

All the thirty women considered vows as the central part or theme of a wedding and thus without it, there is no wedding because the vows commit both parties to the success of the marriage. Reciting the vows acknowledges the fact that the couple is willing to do anything within their power to keep the marriage intact. They feel that the whole ceremony revolves round the wedding vows. This is what a respondent said when asked about the most important aspect of weddings:

The exchange of vows is the most important aspect of weddings. That is the essential part because there is no wedding if this doesn't happen; it is the central part of the wedding.

Another also seconded by saying that:

The vows are the most important aspect because I think that is the main reason you are there. To promise commitment to each other and all that.

Some reasons attributed to the wedding vows as the most important aspect of weddings by our respondents included the fact that, it exhibits the importance of the other person to the other. Couples convey how much value they place on each other through the vows, especially when it is personally written. It is basically a sacred vow between the couple claiming that they will love each other and be committed to each other through thick and thin. One respondent confirmed this by saying:

The vows are the most important aspect because that will keep us together for a long time. Once I say something, I hardly go back on what I say so if we can commit ourselves to that, we can remind ourselves on what we said on that day to stay together through thick and thin.

The brief reasons given above affirm the belief that women attach a very huge significance to the wedding vows viewing it as a show of love, commitment and protection to each other. These vows are said by the couple to each other emphasizing that they accept one another; they are ready to fulfill promises such as faithfulness, reliability and trust. They show their readiness by saying the words loudly to the hearing of all the witnesses and ultimately in the presence of God. The relevance related to the wedding vows cannot be disputed as one of the influences of the obsession of weddings by women. With all the importance of wedding vows established by our respondents, it is enough to say that women attach much significance to the weddings vows because it provides some form of security to the marriage knowing that the spouse has made commitments for which he is obliged to follow. Moreover, traditional ceremonies mostly do not have this aspect been included which can sway women to consider having white weddings because of the importance they attach to the wedding vows.

The Rings

The exchange of rings between the couple holds a lot of meaning which clearly is quite important to women. The ring is a piece of jewelry that basically signifies that an individual is married. It is typically worn on the base of the left fourth finger. A book titled ‘Beginning Your Marriage’ by L. Thomas spoke about wedding rings in a discussion of symbols. ‘The bride and groom usually give each other rings in a shape of a circle, symbolizing that they hope their love will be without end’, the book stated. In view of this, women hold wedding rings in high esteem obviously making meanings out of it. They think it is a sign of the continuing commitment, a reminder of the promise made to each other, a symbol of the union and faithfulness to each other. The woman feels she is secured enough in the marriage when she has the ring on her finger because the ring signifies the unending love the husband has for her and no other woman.

One of the respondent said:

The exchange of rings is the most important aspect because the rings serve as a symbol of the marriage

This view shows that women see wedding rings as a very important symbol and as a representation of the whole marriage. That is, the rings serve as a sign of the marriage and without them, the whole marriage looks like a sham. One needs to wear a ring to be recognized as a married man or woman. Therefore, wedding rings cannot be ignored as one of the major reasons women may be obsessed with weddings. One student also affirmed our assertion by saying:

The exchange of the rings is the most important aspects of weddings to me because the ring is my main aim

She made this statement with a lot of earnestness devoid of any jokes demonstrating to us that the wedding ring was very significant to her. To her, the wedding ring is the marriage itself and without it, people will assume she is not even married. Also, women differentiate wedding rings from other rings such as engagement rings and think that the wedding rings are only exchanged at wedding ceremonies between the couple.

The Blessings

The blessings or prayers for the couple at wedding ceremonies was an important feature in our findings. These blessings are either said together as a couple or the pastor leads the blessings in the form of a prayer. Receiving the wedding blessing is of great importance because it can have many effects; it provides strength for enduring love and fidelity, understanding one another, helps partners to forgive each other and reconcile, ask for future blessings such as happiness and contentment, sustain the couple, bless the couple’s home and pray for mutual love, respect and honor. Our findings indicated to us that, women attach great importance to this element of weddings because they feel that is the part where the God factor is established. One respondent when interviewed said:

The most important part of weddings is where the blessings are showered on them or where they are prayed for because in everything you consider your creator first and if God is not in control, what you want to happen won't happen

A teaching assistant also had this to say about the blessings aspect:

I think the blessing by the priest is most important because it seals the wedding in front of God.

Clearly, God's presence and blessings are very relevant during weddings and this is the prevalent part where God is invited into the wedding or by a large extent the marriage itself. God is seen as the glue to the marriage and thus He is invited to keep the couple together in all times. The blessings part seals the wedding in front of God since God has control over everything. They feel God's presence needs to be felt in the marriage because they cannot make the marriage work without Him.

Others

Exchange of vows, rings and wedding blessings were the most important aspects of weddings our findings brought out. However, we recorded other answers such as the kissing part, signing of the marriage certificate, the wedding procession, the bridal wear and even some went to the extent to say all the parts of the wedding. Notwithstanding, all these aspects of weddings go a long way to influence the obsession of weddings by women. Most of these aspects are peculiar to weddings as compared to traditional weddings which can be one major reason for this obsession. The kissing aspect for example is one uncharacteristic aspect of traditional weddings where love and affection are shown physically. One student claimed:

I think you may kiss the bride is the most important aspect of weddings to me, because I like it when two people are showing their love to each other. And it is one part where you can show publicly without people judging or commenting badly about it.

Another peculiar aspect of weddings is the procession, specifically the walking down the aisle of the bride by the father. The bride walks through the center of the church to the altar where the groom waits usually accompanied by the father. It is an essential moment for the bride and the father. One of the respondents elaborated by saying:

I will pick walking down the aisle as the most important aspect of weddings. This is where the father walks the daughter down the aisle towards the husband to be. It is an emotional moment for both the father and daughter because the father gets to be the father on the day and gives the child to another man to take care of. He hands over the reins of fatherhood to another man to continue what he started. They show love and tenderness and bid each other goodbye on a positive note.

We can infer from this respondent's view that, she has a very good relationship with the father and will like to experience that emotional moment with him and this moment can only be shared with the father on the wedding ceremony. This walk is done publicly in front of all witnesses, family and friends. Some fathers even shed one or two tears during this walk as they 'lose' their daughters to another man. Another opinion we came across from another respondent had to do with the signing of the wedding certificate. This is one typical aspect of weddings which signifies the legality of the marriage. This proves that the marriage is a legal one and the certificate contains the signatures of the selected witnesses and the couple. One respondent had this to say about it:

The signing of the certificate is the important aspect of wedding because it makes the wedding legally accepted.

With all these aspects of weddings expressed by our respondents and the reasons attributed to them, we can relate women's obsession of weddings to these aspects of weddings due to the significance they

exude. Also, for the fact that, most of these elements of weddings are only exclusive to white weddings and thus may relate to the reasons women are obsessed with weddings.

Importance of Weddings

A wedding ceremony is considered as a very important day in every couple's lives, families and even the society. It is the declaration to the whole world of one's unquestionable affection and commitment to one's partner; it is the symbol and foundation of the love between the couple. Below is the discussion of the significance of weddings revealed by our participants which is likely to justify women obsession of weddings.

Binding the couple

A wedding ceremony's fundamental purpose is to unite the bride and the groom in holy matrimony in the presence of God, family and witnesses. It is meant to be a spiritual, physical and emotional bonding for the couple and for their family and friends present. This bond that binds the couple is considered as lifelong and exclusive which has been established by God and cannot be dissolved. Our participants shared the same sentiment believing that the wedding day creates the avenue for the couple to be bonded in love, body, spirit, heart and soul in the presence of God which is a very important factor. They also feel it is one major way that seals the bond that may have been already established between the couple as lovers; the wedding makes the union a done deal. This bond is sealed in several ways; the exchange of vows, rings and the pronouncement of the union by the pastor. However, significantly, this bond is complete when it is done at the altar in front of God, our participants reckoned. The participants interviewed had this to say in relation to whether weddings are important or not:

Yes they are very important for every couple since it is one thing that seals their bond in a way and it gives them recognition among their friends and peers

Yes it doesn't matter whether it is small or big because it religiously or formally binds the couple together in the presence of family and witnesses

The findings indicated that the process of binding the union by the pastor in front of witnesses is quite essential to women even though this is also done in the traditional ceremony. Women however think that; the traditional ceremony does not bind the couple enough because there is an absence of vows as well as the altar. They give grave importance to the vows because they feel it is one significant aspect that unites the couple together. Furthermore, the presence of the altar is essential since weddings are usually organized in churches where they feel the presence of God the most. Thus, women are inclined to be more attracted to weddings as compared to the traditional ceremonies which of course influence their obsession with the former due to the various reasons stated already. This can be attested to by a participant student we interviewed who had this to say:

Yes, it is very important. Comparing the traditional marriage to this, the man is significantly involved in the ceremony while the woman is not. However, with the wedding both the bride and the groom are involved. That is, they both marry each other; they both have a stake in the marriage

Legal importance of marriage

Recent wedding ceremonies are usually accompanied with the signing of the marriage certificate by the groom, bride and witnesses from both sides. We realized that weddings are important to women because it is an opportunity to legalize the marriage between the couple without necessarily having a civil ceremony or better still going to the judicial offices. Women seem to be more secured with weddings because of its legality. This statement was confirmed when one participant said:

.....even though we have the traditional marriage, these kinds of weddings are seen as a more legal form of marriage.....

A teaching assistant also had this to say about the legal importance of weddings:

Yes because the traditional wedding is more of polygamous marriage and the man can go and marry others but with the white wedding, it will just be us unless divorce

We gathered from these comments that, women view weddings to be a legitimized union which secures the union as well. It discourages the man from having extra marital affairs because there is some form of punishment legally since the law forbids it. Hence, women prefer the weddings in addition to traditional weddings because of this aspect which certainly has an influence on the obsession of weddings by women.

Weddings as unnecessary occasion

We established previously or above that, weddings are quite important to women due to the various reasons they attach to the celebration. However, we came across a sizeable number of women out of our participants who expressed the unimportance nature of weddings. They basically considered the ceremony as trivial or unnecessary. It is then worthy to mention the fact that we encountered several opposite views towards the importance of wedding ceremonies. These participants had other contradictory views on weddings pointing towards the fact that marriage was more important than the ceremony. They expressed the life after the ceremony as more essential than a rite that lasts for a few hours. One participant hit the nail right on its head when she gave her opinion:

No I don't think so because it is just a day to celebrate and the rest is marriage

This statement basically indicates that, the wedding is not essential to her but rather she accords much importance to the lifetime commitment which is the marriage. Marriage is a permanent state and a process as well while the wedding ceremony is a temporal rite which obviously does not even last for a day. Therefore, there is no need to attach the much importance to a wedding ceremony while a lifetime commitment such as marriage is of great importance. Also, another participant stressed this point by saying that a wedding ceremony is not important because with the emergence of weddings, women rather think about superficial things such as money, gifts and the perception people hold about them than the essence of the wedding itself. This is exactly what she said when asked:

It is not important because sometimes when people get to the church to have a wedding, they don't think about the essence of the wedding but rather they think about how people see them, whether they are rich, the gifts they will receive but they don't think about what goes into the wedding; the oaths, vows. They are just not concerned about these things.

Another statement by one student also confirmed other views that the ceremony is just assumed as an access to the married life and thus should not be accorded much importance. Rather, the main purpose of the wedding which is a lifetime relationship with one's partner should be of paramount significance. This is exactly what she said to confirm the statement above:

I don't really think so because I think what matters more is what happens after the wedding and not the wedding itself. The ceremony doesn't guarantee a lasting marriage

More so, several participants gave us the impression of weddings been a waste of time, money and simply referred to it as needless. These women acknowledged the essence of the traditional ceremony considering it as a wedding on its own. Even though, our society nowadays deems the traditional marriage as not a wedding but an engagement party rather, these participants did not share that thought. They however believed that the traditional ceremony is a wedding and thus people should not waste time organizing a white wedding which will by and large serve the same purpose. Two of our student participants had this to say when we probed on the importance of weddings:

It is not really important because the most important thing is to get married so if you are able to do the traditional marriage, I don't think the wedding is necessary. There is no need to waste money to have the wedding since you are already married to the person. No, I don't think it is important because as long as you perform your country's traditional wedding, then you are done. There is no need for a wedding.

The Resolve to have a Wedding at all Cost

In delving more into whether women are indeed obsessed with weddings and the reasons attributed to it, we examined if women were so intrigued with the phenomenon that they will want a wedding at all cost. At all cost meaning the use of all possible means. That is, in accomplishing an objective such as having a wedding, the individual utilizes every means to do it even if the outcome might be disadvantageous to the person.

Our findings indicated that, fourteen (14) out of the thirty (30) participants will want a wedding, fifteen (15) wouldn't want to have one and three (3) of them were not so sure about that. All these responses were also accompanied with similar reasons. The three (3) participants who were not so sure about having a wedding at all cost believed that it depends on certain conditions such as their parents and the choice of their partners. First, we will evaluate the 'yes' responses; Almost half of the fourteen (14) women who said yes to having a wedding at all cost did not really have a significant reason to their answers. Some also did not have any reason at all; they just liked the idea of a wedding and felt it was a necessity. Few of them who also attached reasons to their responses; they thought that the wedding was the only way people will know they are married. Others also claimed that, weddings provide an avenue for one to dress up while another also argued that she will have a wedding for the benefits of her parents. Another also thought that, she will have a wedding because that kind of ceremony will involve her as compared to the traditional ceremony. These were the responses recorded:

Yes, because of my parents

Yes, I will because it is very essential to me. I wish to take my wedding further to the church so I feel I am also involved and committed to the ceremony and marriage

Yes, because I will like to have everything that comes with a wedding especially honoring my parents.

We also discovered that, women do not only want to have a wedding for their sakes but for honoring their parents. They feel a wedding day especially for the bride's family is an important day for them as people hold them in high esteem on that day and the days after. Thus, these women will want to honor their parents by achieving this feat. A response given was:

Oh yes, not for just my sake, my reputation or the respect I will gain but for my parents as well. They will be recognized as the parents of the bride; it is an important day for them as well since pride, prestige and honor will be due them.

Others also thought they will like to experience the joy and happiness they see when they attend weddings. They believe a wedding comes with a lot of happiness and they will like to experience it too. One participant responded by saying:

Certainly because I go to weddings and enjoy what I see so I will like to experience it too

Concerning the 'No' participants, thus those who think wedding is not highly significant, they felt that, weddings are more expensive as compared to other forms of marriage ceremonies such as the civil and the traditional marriage. People invest so much money and time for a ceremony that endures for just a few hours which the participants believed was a pointless rite. They however thought that women could opt for other alternatives like the traditional ceremony which they deemed as a marriage ceremony. These women opinionated that, they will not have a wedding at all cost because of the expenditure involved and the debts that would arise afterwards. These were the responses recorded in this regard:

No, because to me, if my partner doesn't have the money then I will go in for a court wedding but no matter what there should be a legal backing to our marriage in order to protect me.

No, I wouldn't want to. If I have my traditional marriage, I am okay.

No, I love weddings but if my partner insists he doesn't want one then we won't have one.

No, if it involves going in for loans and things like that, I wouldn't want to have that.

No, not at all cost. What if we can't afford? So not at all cost.

No, I won't want that because if my husband can't afford it, I won't push it.

From the above few responses, if they cannot afford the cost involved, they do not see why they should force themselves to go beyond their means. These answers from our respondents clearly show that, weddings are just ceremonies and a one-day event which many people are not ready to have it at all cost even though being married is a life time commitment.

Conclusion and Discussion to the study

In traditional societies like ours (Africa) where traditional ceremonies are entitled as marriages and the infiltration of modern culture where white weddings are fast becoming the norm, there was the need to examine the importance and perception of these ceremonies by women to find out if and why women are obsessed with the phenomenon. Even though, it is assumed young women have distinguished between the traditional ceremony and the wedding defining the former as an engagement party, findings revealed that women still regarded the traditional ceremony as a complete marriage rite. It is an undeniable fact that women value the term wedding because of its legal nature, the social status and recognition it comes with but as to whether women are obsessed with weddings, our findings came out negative in that sense.

Findings also revealed that, most women wanted a simple but classy wedding; it didn't have to be expensive or extravagant. They just wanted one which will bring family and friends together to witness the sealing of the relationship between the man and the wife. Therefore, it can be argued that, women are not obsessed with weddings, at least not in our part of the world. In an African society, the research area'' women's obsession with weddings'' has hardly been conducted. We therefore recommend that more studies be conducted in Africa and in Ghana as well. This is because, weddings are social issues which need to be investigated deeper to find out more interesting discoveries to the issue. In addition to this, one way this can be carried out is to look at weddings from the men's point of view. Our study covered women only and therefore our findings were based on the views and opinions of women solely and so, studies should be carried out in relation to the men to find out their own views and opinions to have a balanced insight to the whole issue.

Lastly, we would suggest that, more emphasis should not be placed on the wedding ceremony itself but on the marriage. The consequences of the concentration on wedding ceremonies are quite grave because the couple, especially the woman might want to have an extravagant ceremony where too much expense is wasted on such a ceremony. Most of the time, these couple might not have the means in organizing such a wedding and thus will result in borrowing money from people and even banks which usually put a strain on the marriage after the wedding because of the struggle with the numerous debts. Also, we suggest that couple understand that traditional weddings are also weddings and so they should not go all the way into having a wedding at all cost even when they don't have the financial means. This helps to reduce the rate of divorce because lack of financial support in the marriage will bring about misunderstandings and problems.

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