

Marriage Customs

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Exchanging Vows Sri Lankan Style

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The mosaic which is Sri Lankan society is nowhere more evident than when a wedding takes place. Among all ethnic groups in the island, in the tradition of all the four religions practised here, it is regarded as a social event with deeply religious-cultural overtones. It is primarily of importance to the family of course for in Sri Lanka family bonds are close and strong but it is also a matter for social celebration and participation by other members of society – relations, friends, well wishers of the bridal couple and their respective families.

The Sinhalese, Tamils, Muslims and Burghers who compose the “mosaic” of Sri Lankan society all have their special marriage customs. but the extent to which a great many custom have inter-mixed is not astonishing when one remembers that these four ethnic groups have lived side by side for many, many centuries. For example, a Kandyan or Low Country Sinhalese bride might wear a ,eil and a wreath of orange blossoms and a Christian bride might wear, as well as her wedding ring, the traditional “thali” or throatlet made of gold tied around her neck by her husband as they plight their troth.

It is not unusual to see a young man in full suit at the expression goes: that is, dressed formally in Western style, tying the nuptial knot with his bride standing together on the raised and ornamented dais or “poruwa” and the ceremony of the pouring of water on the groom’s feet modified because he would be wearing shoes or sandals.

The Muslim bride would be heavily veiled in gold or silver spangled net, but she would be wearing a most fashionable Western-styled long, formal dress for her wedding and not the sari or salwar kameez. And all brides would carry wedding bouquets of fresh flowers and beribboned lovers’ knots, which is also a Western custom. A Burgher/Christian bride might choose to wear a gorgeous sari on her

wedding day, rather than a frock – and all this inter-mixing of customs makes for very exotic wedding ceremonies, indeed, and makes weddings themselves very important and well celebrated occasions in society.

As far as Buddhists are concerned, a marriage is a social contract and no ‘priest’ is needed to solemnize it. A Buddhist wedding never takes place in the temple but in the bride’s house or, in these times, if the families can afford it, in a hotel. The legal registration is usually done beforehand at the registry office, but the Registrar is often invited to perform this part of the ceremony at the place where the “poruwa ceremony” is also to be held. The “poruwa” or wedding throne is a raised dais with a canopy of wood or cloth and beautifully decorated with auspicious symbols like the “pun kalas” or pots of plenty, lotus buds and blooms, sheaves of paddy and coconut flowers. A carpet or rug is laid upon it on which the couple stands during the brief ceremony.

Gifts are exchanged between bride and bridegroom on the “poruwa”, rings are exchanged and worn, a necklace is tied by the groom round the neck of the bride and then the bride’s uncle appears to tie the “Ata Nu! Bandima” or marriage knot – a silken thread tied round the right thumbs of the bride and bridegroom to signify the binding character of marriage. Water is then poured over the knotted thumbs from a “kendiya” or brass vessel with a spout. The bride and groom then feed each other portions of the auspicious food: “kiribath” or milk rice which is cooked for all ceremonial occasions in Sri Lanka, accompanied by ripe plantains and “rasa kavili” or sweetmeats.

The Hindu marriage usually takes place in the early hours of night or in the late evening hours. It is held either at the “kovil” (temple) precincts in a special hall or in the house of the bride. The Hindu marriage rituals go back to the distant Vedic past. The sacred fire, the “Homan” (Omam), is raised and a Brahmin priest conducts the rites. To the chanting of the priest and the resonant music of the “mangalavadiyam” (the wedding drums) the bridegroom ties the gold ‘thali’ on a chain round the neck of the bride. The couple walks three times with their right sides towards the fire, and water plays as important a part as that other element in a Hindu marriage.

The father of the bride takes his daughter’s hand, joins it with that of the bridegroom and water is poured onto their clasped hands. In this ritual of water consecration in both Buddhist and Hindu marriages the uncle or the father, as the case may be, is enacting a “legal deed” even if he is not conscious of it any longer:

the pouring of water accompanying a gift or transfer of property in Hindu law. In the Hindu ceremonial too the couple feeds each other before the guests are served. In both types of marriage it is customary for the bridegroom to heap gifts upon his in-laws and for the bride's people to shower gifts on the bridegroom and his relatives.



A Christian wedding ceremony officiated by a priest. (Mahinda Fernando)



A Muslim bride and groom sit among the crescent moons and clusters of flowers.

In a truly village wedding a "Magul Maduwa" or wedding hall is built mainly of banana trunks and woven coconut leaves and here the guests sit and are regaled with food and drink and give and receive gifts. The rabana, a large, convivial, festal drum, is beaten by the womenfolk, jokes are cracked and songs sung till the bridegroom leads his bride to their new home, accompanied by members of both their families. In urban and suburban areas, of course, the Western custom of the "honeymoon" has replaced the old ways and the couple leaves for some secret destination for a few days, returning to a joyous "homecoming" party, usually held at the home of the bridegroom's parents.

The Muslims keep the traditional laws of Islam in celebrating their marriages. Arranged marriages are yet more common among them, and there are instances even today when the bride does not see her groom till the auspicious time of the wedding ceremony, which she attends fully veiled. The ceremony, which is extremely simple and is focused on the couple's consent as in the Christian rituals, is carried out by the imam or priest of the nearby mosque. The bridegroom's party is greeted by the bride's father and brothers and rose water is sprinkled and flowers scattered upon them on arrival while they are led to a cistern where their feet are ritually washed. Sometimes gifts of clothes are exchanged. The bridegroom brings along a complete set of jewellery and a silk sari for his bride. Small dishes of

cardamoms are passed round amongst the guests along with tall glasses of iced sherbet. A sumptuous dinner is served. Though a Muslim bride might wear white on her wedding day, the old wedding colour was red -red with gold or silver accessories. The bride is given away by her father and it is customary for the ceremony to be held in the open and in the early evening before prayer time.

The Christian marriage ceremony is regarded as a “sacrament” and takes place in a church. The ritual is conducted by a priest who blesses the couple and their rings and states the words of the marriage bond afterwards repeated solemnly by the couple, who make their vows before “God and man”. In all four religious disciplines marriage is regarded as for life. Divorce is permissible in certain instances among all communities but always with fair legal compensation to the bride, often a return of dowry and allowances for any children of the marriage.

Falling in love and marrying on their own volition is not uncommon among young people in modern Sri Lanka, as almost everywhere in the world today, but the “magul kapuwa” or marriage broker is by no means an obsolete figure in our society. At one time he played a very important role and was a character by himself. Most parents with marriageable children get in touch with him to find a suitable partner for their offspring. He usually succeeds. No longer, of course, is a girl or boy forced to marry their parents’ choice of partner, though children, to a great extent, yet trust their parents in this regard.

The newspaper columns on Sundays carry long rows of “matrimonial requisites and prospects” and these are avidly read by those in search of spouses. Many a successful marriage in recent decades began with advertising in the newspapers or answering such ‘ads’. In the Buddhist tradition, apart from the normal marriage where a daughter is given in the wedding bond to a son of an approved family, there are also the “binna” and “deega” marriages -in the Kandyan areas of the hilly hinterland. In the “binna” marriage the husband leaves his family to live and work with his bride’s people and in their home. In this matrilineal marriage, according to ancient custom, the husband has no privileges and even the children take their mother’s name at times. This type of marriage usually takes place where there is an only daughter in the family who is the inheritor of considerable property.



A colourful Hindu wedding ceremony is conducted by a Hindu 'poosari'. (Prasanna Hennayake)

In a "deega" marriage, which is the more common, the woman leaves her parental home to live in the house of her husband's people. As far as her family is concerned, the wife loses any right to parental property except what has been specially given as her wedding portion or dowry. The dowry system, in spite of modern attitudes to it, is still flourishing in Sri Lanka. It is decided upon before the marriage in the case of arranged ones. But even love marriages are often enhanced by a dowry. It is, however, not as binding upon young women as in other parts of Asia, India notably. More important is that the horoscopes of the couple match, as this 'reading' foretells whether the marriage of two people will be happy and successful and blessed with good luck and progeny.