



Big Fat African Weddings: Commercialisation of Traditional Culture, and Its Consequences

By Paul Goldsmith



During the early 1800s, the Nuer of South Sudan began pushing out of their traditional homeland and increased their territory four-fold at the expense of their Dinka and Anuak neighbours by the late 1880s. The anthropologist Raymond Kelley described it as one of most prominent cases of tribal imperialism in the ethnographic record. According to his analysis, the Nuer expansion, which involved the acquisition of resources far beyond that required to satisfy their normal material needs, was driven by the rising cost of bride price.

Today we are witnessing a variation on bride price inflation of a different order. The institution of marriage has given rise to a new economic growth sector in the form of the wedding industry. For example, the wedding industry is now estimated to be worth US\$ 60 billion in the United States and over \$300 Billion globally. The global figures probably do not include Africa, where the wedding industry is a newer but even faster growing phenomenon in many African nations.

An ancient institution

Marriage is the most ancient and stable of human institutions. Anthropologists trace the institution to the need to avoid incest and establish the paternity of offspring.

Stone Age humans formalised the contractual bonding of husband and wife through the exchange of

gifts, and most hunter-gatherer societies engaged in ritual courtship. We do not yet know whether or not mitochondrial Eve's marriage was arranged, but we do know that the institution of marriage contributed to the competitive advantage of Homo sapiens over their non-marrying Neanderthal neighbours.

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It is not difficult to see how the institutionalised demands of maintaining a healthy gene pool could make a critical difference in circumstances where humans lived in small and isolated groups. Human bands invested in social networks and developed complex kinship systems, while the cavemen who mated by clubbing a woman and dragging her to his cave became dumb and dumber over time. In any event, marriage became a defining feature of human existence.

One scientific publication described the institution in evolutionary terms as "reciprocal exogamy including the exchange of mates, goods, and services, and involving multiple kin lineages often existing in multiple residential communities". Anthropologists investigating the roots of the institution note that these parameters have remained relatively unchanged over the millennia.

With the rise of agriculture, marriage came to mark the passage from childhood to adulthood, conferring new rights and responsibilities in the process. The celebrations accompanying marriage played a fundamental role in fostering communal identity and solidarity. Before long, marriage was also key factor in building political relationships—a function that was elevated when the rise of royal dynasties saw marriage become an instrument of foreign policy.

This matrix of factors still obtains for marriage in African society. The institution is about much more than formalising the bio-emotional bond between two individuals, which now characterises Western practice. In most societies, it encompasses normative behaviour patterns and traits, including the wedding ceremonies and exchanges that formalise the contract. The marriage itself comes with expectations of relative permanence: shared residence, gender-based division of labour and management of resources, a sexual relationship oriented towards procreation and cooperation in child bearing and training.

While these factors, like the primacy of the nuclear family, are universal, the model based on the contract's societal benefits has experienced significant attrition during the modern era. The wedding industry is the latest development to complicate the human dimension of marriage, and it appears to be racing out of control.

Conspicuous consumption

During the 1960s, weddings, especially the lavish high-cost version, came to be seen as effete. The contract was increasingly seen as a bond based on the relationship between two individuals. Divorce rates shot up and non-traditional unions between individuals of different backgrounds, including people of different religious, racial or social origins, proliferated. Pairing was about love. The resulting unions did not require an external religious or secular authority to legitimise it; the conventional ceremonial component was passé.

This encouraged the pursuit of innovative weddings, often held in unorthodox settings that appeal to the romantic ideal. The barefoot-on-the-beach wedding was popularised when Becks betrothed Posh in a sarong. The couple showcased several outfits, including bright violet costumes for the wedding

party and a matching cowboy hat for baby Brooklyn. David Beckham later admitted that the garb made him look like “one of the guys in Dumb and Dumber” [the movie].

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The Beckham extravaganza came after Princess Diana’s 1981 “wedding of the century”, which made celebrity weddings fashionable. The wedding of Prince William and Kate Middleton set a new bar for the 21st century—although, as in the case of the Diana event, most of the reported cost of \$34 million was spent on security; the cost of the bride’s dress, at \$434,000, was modest in comparison.

In many places, weddings have always provided a stage for conspicuous consumption. The prince of Abu Dhabi, Mohammed bin Zayed, built a 20,000-seat stadium specially built for his seven-day, \$100 million nuptials in 1981. The fashion among wealthy Indians is flying the entire wedding party consisting of several hundred guests to exotic destinations abroad.

Such extreme examples underscore the meteoric rise of the wedding industry across the planet. Fashionable contemporary weddings across the world now involve a full complement dressmakers, florists, reception halls, event planners, photographers, caterers, limo firms, DJs, bands, and jewellery designers. Few people can match the glass coach, the 25-foot bridal train, and the estimated 750 million television viewers of Princess Diana’s wedding, but many are willing to go into debt to finance a ceremony that is becoming the nuptial version of the arms race.

The wedding industry is flourishing across continents and cultures. In China, the \$57-billion industry is registering a 7.8 per cent annual growth, but this will soon be trumped by India where the industry is expanding by 25 per cent a year. In the United Arab Emirates, the average cost of nuptials is estimated to be around \$80,000. In the US, the average cost of a wedding is equivalent to a year’s salary for many service-sector employees or a year of university education.

These numbers appear to reflect relative differentials in income. The most expensive place in the US to get married is Manhattan, where the average cost is over \$76,000, or five times the cost in Utah where the typical wedding expenditure is \$15,257. The fact that this state is booming economically points to the influence of culture as well—which may represent the best hope for mitigating the more ominous implications accompanying the commercialisation of marriage and sexuality.

The Big African Wedding

During a trip to Addis Ababa last year, I went to a studio to get some passport pictures. There were several picture albums in the waiting area. They were actually gigantic, hardcover ledgers showcasing glamorous pictures of wedding couples, bridesmaids, best men, and other sundry wedding participants conspicuously adorned in some of the most expensively elegant finery I have ever seen. During the remainder of my visit I began to notice the proliferation of large and small wedding shops across the city.

I initially thought it was an Ethiopian thing. Wrong. Once alerted to its existence, evidence of Africa’s new wedding industry started to pop up everywhere. In Zambia there are weddings that last two weeks. The wedding industry in Kampala has seen the ten event organising companies operating in 2010 to grow to more than a hundred in 2017. Televised weddings provide revenue for Ugandan television stations that now charge 1 million shillings (\$330) to broadcast lavish weddings.

Nigeria, true to form, is at the forefront of Africa's new wedding sector. The industry that some say is fueled by Nigerians' natural love of celebration probably owes more to their competitive nature. The CEO of one Nigerian wedding planning company explains: "People want their event to be the best. They want it to be better than the next person's so they won't spare any expense to do whatever they need to do to get it done."

This is a country where the wealthy elite once threw parties where they would impress their guests by displaying millions of Naira bank notes in glass cases. Now, "getting it done" at weddings includes stunts like "spraying" the wedding guests with US dollar bills. Although the currency on display under thick glass attracted the attention of Nigeria's audacious criminal class, it usually ended up back in the bank on Monday morning. Spraying guests with dollars upped the ante in the country's "go big or go home" stakes.

Kenya's fast growing wedding industry has spawned hundreds of wedding planners and businesses offering everything from florists to high-end caterers and other related specialists. This service sector actually dates back to the Western infatuation with the wedding as an adventure theme, which has drawn couples from abroad to Kenya to tie the knot. The wedding-in-the-bush is a niche market that is still doing well, based on the number of Kenyan tour companies advertising diverse safari wedding packages. But it is small change compared to the new urban African wedding complex with its complement of service providers, magazines, television shows, and family brokers skilled at maximising the returns on nubile daughters.

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On the one hand, the industry is a tech-savvy, Internet friendly economic sub-sector, but on the other, it is just another globalised neoliberal cash cow. At least in West Africa the industry is spawning a new fashion industry showcasing creative variations on traditional clothing. Fashionable African wedding attire has even added a few hundred boards to the 38 million and growing Pinterest wedding posts, and its pretty neat stuff. Kenya's wedding juggernaut, in contrast, is driven by the couples' marked preference for the Eurocentric "white" wedding.

"White" Kenyan weddings

Ngugi wa Thiong'o built a literary career by exposing the mentality behind many Kenyans' inverted relationship with indigenous values and preference for the trifles identified with Western ways. The contemporary white wedding is the latest flagship for this mindset. This line of critique makes Kenya's first Big Shot wedding a bit incongruous—it was actually celebrated in Maasailand.

Sometime around the mid-1970s, the expansive Maasai Minister in Jomo Kenyatta's government, Stanley Oloiptip, threw an exceptionally exorbitant wedding for his oldest son. Stylistically, it contradicted almost everything Maasai culture stood for. It was certainly as outsized by the more modern standards of the day as the girth of the physically immense politician.

The irrepressible Oloiptip justified the spectacle as a testament to "the fruits of Uhuru". This explanation focused public attention on the diversion of state resources to fund the affair, a concern further compounded by the fact that the Honourable Minister had sired 46 other children.

As it turned out, there was no happy ending for the Big Man. In 1985, he suddenly found himself in

prison for the misuse of public resources. Like the overpriced wedding gowns at the centre of contemporary weddings, the five normal prison uniforms sewn together to clothe him were used for only one day: he was released on bond the following morning and passed away several days later.

Although the Kenyan public has been treated to the occasional high profile wedding since then, the new big wedding phenomenon is defined by its distribution and scale. This is why some commentators applaud it as a vibrant growth industry and others hype it as symbolic of middle class prosperity—even though a large portion of newly weds don't have the money to pay for their weddings.

The moral of the Oliotiptip story dovetails with other qualities associated with the big wedding trend. Close to a quarter of the couples opting for these bling weddings go into debt to finance them, and the majority of them regret the expenditure soon afterwards. A more disturbing statistic: the bigger the wedding, the shorter the marriage.

Even so, the trend persists. One Ugandan professional stated that he has saved 50 million shillings for a big wedding. He says he only wants to have a wedding that befits his status as an educated man. If he can't afford that, he'd rather not have a wedding at all. No wedding is now the norm for many, and no marriage at all is increasingly common. One regional study found that 50 per cent of young couples were living in free unions and another 25 per cent of women were raising children as single mothers.

Traditional *communitas* versus wedding bling

Weddings have long served as a vehicle for conspicuous consumption and the spread of consumer culture. The fact that both the rich and the middle classes now own fancy cars, TVs and designer handbags has raised the status-generating power of one-time social events like weddings. Wedding planners say that the industry is driven by women's desire to be a Queen, and the center of attention *albeit* for one day. Men play along for reasons of status and prestige.

Traditional ceremonies were ritualised communal affairs imbued with layers of symbolism and meaning. The primary functions of many ceremonies, such as weddings, were to mark passage to a new stage of the life cycle and to foster unity within the community. The anthropologist Victor Turner's classic study on African ritual and ceremony focused on the deep properties of these phenomena, and the universal role of *liminality* and *communitas*.

Liminality refers to the beginning or transitional stage in a process. The person at the centre of the transition is often regarded to be in a weak and dangerous or inauspicious state. Rituals based on the society's spiritual, magical and religious traditions generate a state of *communitas* to insure the safe transition of the person in this liminal state.

The term *communitas* is associated with sharing a common experience that takes a whole community to the next level. Rites, rituals and ceremonies designed to temporarily negate differentials of rank and status create a social space based on homogeneity, equality and anonymity. This promotes a sense of group wholeness. Individuality is submerged in unity in a manner facilitating transformation. The way the spirit of a harambee fund-raising event induces you to contribute beyond your planned contribution is an example of the same.

The public ceremony is, in this sense, not an event, but part of a social process that facilitates the safe transition of the *liminal* individual, be it from girl to woman, boy to man, or candidate to group chief and leader. The state of *communitas* it engenders imbues the group with a lasting sense of unity and solidarity that allows society to function despite its internal conflicts and inequalities of

wealth and status.

Turner describes how the process works in the case of the appointment of a new chief among the Ndembu of Zambia. After a period of sexual abstinence, the new candidate and his wife are housed in the specially constructed *kafu*, or death hut. They are dressed in rags and made to assume a submissive position. While in this state of liminality, elders revile the future leader: "Be silent! You are a mean and selfish fool, one who is bad-tempered! You do not love your fellows, you are only angry with them! Meanness and theft are all you have! Yet here we have called you and we say that you must succeed to the chieftainship."

The couple are abused and forced to stay awake all night while commoners are invited to berate them for any misdeeds large or small. They are beaten and rubbed with special herbs. After this ordeal, the chief-to-be is instructed in his duties:

We have desired you and you only for our chief. Let your wife prepare food for the people who come here to the capital village. Do not be selfish, do not keep the chieftainship to yourself! You must laugh with the people, you must abstain from witchcraft! You must not be killing people! You must not be ungenerous to people! Today you are born as a new chief. If you were mean, and used to eat your cassava mush or your meat alone, today you are in the chieftainship. You must give up your selfish ways, you must welcome everyone, you are the chief!

The ritual results in the figurative death of the liminal candidate and his rebirth as a leader. Turner goes on to detail how many other ceremonial processes across cultures, including the coronation of Popes, display many of the same structural attributes.

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Traditional weddings are a benign version of this ceremonial process where two individuals are reborn and transformed into a legally recognised husband and wife sanctified by the higher powers. The passages on marriage in the Quran, Bible and other religious texts underscore the sanctity and spiritual quality of such unions, and most cultural and religious weddings display similar dynamics to sanctify and bless the marriage contract.

In my own case, prior my own wedding, the idea of getting married was a remote and distant prospect. I was living in Lamu, and the process started as an idea suggested by close friends who told me, "Marrying is easy and since you are here you should give it a try even if just for a week." The idea evolved into an experimental possibility that in turn led to a proposal to marry, arranged in the usual manner.

The only request from my side was that the marriage ceremony would be a small, private affair. Swahili weddings, in my view, were carnival style affairs that did not fit my style. I wanted a closed personal ceremony to go with the already exotic circumstances.

"Sure, we will do it that way if that's what you want," my future in-laws told me. Although I did not know it, at the time, I was totally out of my depth, in a liminal state of ignorance, weakness, naiveté, and vulnerability.

I also did not realise that the coast was home to the region's most developed indigenous wedding

industry. As the time approached, I was informed of a series of unanticipated developments: a bus arrived with furniture and other trappings; the next day another came from Mombasa with a posse of musicians, a boat arrived with guests from the islands, and so on. This build-up countered my expectations of a small intimate wedding.

A week before the actual event, people started addressing me as *Bwana Harusi*. Lamu's normally shy ladies began to accost me with propositions, and several times women dragged me into their homes as I passed through the town's narrow alleys. My "handlers" told me that as *Bwana Harusi* I was fair game for such mischief until the formal marriage; it was best I stay indoors. They were otherwise helpful but not very informative. Among other things, they did not explain that a proper wedding is mandatory for a girl's first marriage, and that the arrangements were the exclusive province of the bride's family.

Three days of robust wedding celebrations ensued. I became caught up in the spirit, and consented to options for the groom's side, like holding the *kirumbizi* stick fighting dance and the all-night *kesha* party. My father surrogate arranged for the *kirumbizi*, which coincided with the district secondary school sports tournament. The presence of the archipelago's most athletically inclined youth insured it was the most fiercely contested *kirumbizi* stick fighting in Lamu's modern history. Swept away by the spirit of this *communitas*, I ended up splurging on food, miraa for my Somali friends, and a Bajuni *msondo* dance followed by what became a public party while the bride's taarabu music echoed through the other side of time.

After sunrise I was married in the kind of simple ceremony I had originally requested, although there was still one last surprise.

I had paid the conventional dowry for that time of several thousand shillings. But when the actual moment came, I was confused when I heard the town's most respected sheikh ask me the formulaic question: Do you agree to marry Safiya binti Mohammed Ali for the *mahari* of 50 Kenya shillings?

This was repeated three times. Though mystified and bewildered, I managed to utter "kabeitu, or "I agree" in Arabic. Only later did I learn that the small sum substituted for the dowry proper, often referred to as *mahari ya Kiarabu*, is designed to protect the family, which typically ends up spending more than the dowry on the wedding. The provision comes into effect if the marriage fails or the groom has legitimate cause for rejecting the bride and reclaims the *mahari* proper. The dowry proper, in any case, goes to the wife, and not her father.

In the evening I was escorted to the bride's house where, according to the Swahili tradition of *fungati*, we spent the next week in the wedding suite where we were treated as royalty. We were both all so liminal at the time, although for different reasons. By the end of the week's seclusion I was integrated into the extended family and emerged as a culturally validated member of Lamu society.

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As individuals, my wife and I were and still are very different people from totally different backgrounds. I am not sure if our union would have survived if it began as the private affair I originally envisioned. It took a while, but I came to understand how the process of public *communitas* and internal family bonding contributed to the fact that forty-one years later we are still

together.

There is a broader moral to this love story.

The impact of commercialised weddings

Victor Turner observes that liminality and *communitas* are essentially phenomena of transition. His analysis explains why many modern phenomena, from millenarian movements and the counter-cultural quest for alternative lifestyles to the rise of Nazism, borrow much of their mythology and symbolism from traditional rites de passage, either in the cultures in which they originate or in the cultures with which they are in contact. Turner documents many forms of these phenomena from once-a-generation ceremonies to the rituals of everyday life.

The same insights apply to the recruitment of jihadi terrorists, and the communal synergy generated by organisations like ISIS, Al Shabaab, and Boko Haram. The “Islamist problem” may appear far removed from the issues raised by the region’s wedding industry, but the two developments are more closely linked than it may appear. Lela Anwar, an administrator with the coast’s Donge Charity Network, offers the following commentary on Mombasa’s changing wedding complex.

A typical wedding in Mombasa now costs more than an average citizen’s salary, yet they are getting bigger and more dramatic. The Nikkah, the nucleus of any Islamic wedding, is a straightforward and inexpensive affair because it mainly involves a recitation of wedding vows followed by attendees sharing a quick repast of coffee and haluwa in the mosque. It is also a mainly male event, complemented by a smaller gathering of female relatives and close friends in another room. Even though the nikkah is the most essential part of the wedding, the reception consumes the majority of time, financial, and human resources. The reception, known as kupamba in Swahili, is an extravagant women-only event featuring an often evening of loud music, outlandish hairdos and makeup, jewel-studded dresses, and multiple servings of fancy food and drinks. Local women view the kupamba through the lens of social class: the fancier the reception is, the more status conferred on the family. Curiously, the kupamba celebration can exert more leverage on social class than actual wealth. A family that hosts an outlandish wedding is regarded as ‘high class’ even if the wedding was funded by loans and donations from extended family and friends.

Muslims are aware that the Prophet Muhammad recommended simple weddings yet despite the religious incentive for sticking to the sunnah traditions, the scale and costs of Swahili weddings continue to rise. This phenomenon is linked to attributed gender dynamics, and specifically to gender roles that are socially enforced in traditional Swahili societies. There are certain female social activities that are frowned upon even though it is fairly acceptable for men to go clubbing or spend long hours away from the family consuming miraa or pursuing other forms of entertainment. Swahili women who deviate from their prescribed roles are, in contrast, given negative labels and may be castigated as being promiscuous or prostitutes. Unlike men, you rarely see women spending hours with friends partaking in social activities outside the home. With almost no outlet or spaces available to women for entertainment, weddings are now the default venues where they can dress up and enjoy an evening of music and fun within a socially acceptable environment. Weddings are an outlet for self-expression; an opportunity for the traditional Swahili woman to morph into a glamour queen. They are a welcome respite from her daily, culturally prescribed cocoon.

Weddings are so important that now invitation cards are sold for as much as Ksh. 7000 by invitees unable to attend. The downside of this commercialisation is that increasingly large numbers of urban and peri-urban youth are finding it difficult to marry. This has provided an

entry point for radicalisation and terrorist recruitment as two recent studies on the coast of Kenya have documented.

The wedding industry, as discussed in the first section of this essay, in many ways contradicts the role of traditional cultural processes. Weddings as events emphasise the conspicuous expenditure of resources for the sake of prestige and competition. Instead of transforming the couples to live in harmony and contribute to the public good, bling weddings condemn many of them to an uphill struggle to survive as a pair.

More traditional wedding ceremonies, as the passage above indicates, offer Swahili women a degree of gender-based *communitas*. The contemporary coastal wedding, however, also reinforces structural inequalities contributing to the radicalisation of both male and female youth. Sex is a powerful and dangerous force that easily leads one into a state of liminal danger. The wedding industry taps into this for material gain. Jihadi radicals effectively exploit the negative aspect of the same social change to recruit individuals who for various economic and ideological reasons fall outside the boundaries of mainstream Islam.

The role of such factors, including constraints associated with the commercialisation of weddings, have been documented by researchers on Kenya's coast and elsewhere. In the meantime, it turns out that a range of high profile players in the West have discovered the value of *communitas* and other spiritual techniques that help merge the individual "I" into the collective "We". Advocates include the top echelon of Google and other Silicon Valley executives, some of most decorated US Navy Seals team leaders, and other copacetic entrepreneurs like Richard Branson. The 2017 book, *Stealing Fire* by Steven Kotler and Jamie Wheal, reports how these players are seeking out ways of replicating the ecstatic sense of unity embedded in the African rituals studied by Victor Turner and others. In the words of the authors, "This feeling tightens social bonds and ignites enduring passion—the kind that lets us come together to plan, organize, and tackle great challenges."

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For the techies, entrepreneurs and soldiers who have adopted pursuits from yoga and bio-feedback meditation to psychedelics and extreme sports, getting into this zone is about enhancing productivity and their cutting edge. It is hardly surprising that the bad guys have developed their own form of *communitas* to do the same. In any event, society needs more of the problem-solving passion the world's top entrepreneurs are seeking to cultivate than the competition driven by the bling of the wedding industry—especially when it comes to some of the human surrogates now being generated by artificial intelligence technology.

The rise of the wedding industry bookends one side of a larger neoliberal trend of inequality and social polarisation; developments on the other side of the spectrum have given rise to the technologically enabled sexbot, first predicted in the original 1975 version of *Stepford Wives* and updated in more recent films like *Blade Runner* and *Ex Machina*. One [blogger](#) summed up the implications for marriage and the family as an existential threat to humanity: "This will blow up the world. It will make crack cocaine look like decaffeinated coffee."

A return to the ritually-reinforced social bonds that made the celebration of marriage a universal rite of passage is needed to sustain the family unit as the most basic human institution. Creative

variations on the modern wedding may yet provide a platform for adaptive cultural innovations on this front. For example, last December, Laabied Mohammed Gurcharan of the Donge Network established a new precedent for Mombasa's wedding scene. Instead of the usual by- invitation-only event, he shared his wedding feast with the children of the Mama Dhahabu Orphanage.

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