

V.I.P. ARTICLE SUBMITTED BY:

Dzifa Duose
Ph.D. Student in Bioengineering
Rice University



Marriage Ceremony in Ghana

The republic of Ghana is a West African country roughly about one thirds the size of the state of Texas but with an equivalent population. It is located on the Gulf of Guinea 8°00'N of the equator with the Greenwich meridian passing through it. Therefore, it can be said that Ghana is geographically closer to the center of the earth than any other country in the world.

As a British colony, it was known as '*the Gold Coast*' due to the vast amount of gold deposits and its widespread use in the colony. The Gold Coast achieved independence from Britain in 1957. The country was then re-named Ghana (which means Warrior King) after the ancient Ghana Empire.

There are about ten ethnic groups in Ghana with about 250 languages and dialects. The ethnic diversity is a reflection of the variety of cultural norms evident in the country. The largest ethnic group-Akan, making up about 50% of the total population observe similar cultural practices of '*rites of passage*' including birth, puberty, marriage and death. My description of Marriage ceremony in Ghana is based mainly on practices of the Akan people.

Marriage among the Akans is not merely between husband and wife but between their families as well. Marriage is a melding of two families and its survival is ensured by both families. In the past, marriages were arranged in the higher echelons of society to merge families of influence, otherwise general courting occurred prior to the act of marriage.

Before Westernization and the advent of Judeo-Christian religions, '*traditional marriage*' consisted of what is now known as '*the engagement ceremony*'. Currently, '*the engagement ceremony*' is performed prior to a Christian and/or Muslim wedding. Since Christian/Muslim weddings are well documented, I will expound on '*traditional Akan marriages*'.

There are several customs that one must adhere to when one wants to get married. Even before a man asks a woman's hand in marriage (or in akan, 'a woman's head in marriage'), he must first introduce himself to the woman's family and state his intention to court and marry her. This ceremony is known as '*knocking*'... here the man together with some prominent/respectable members of his family (i.e. father, uncle, head of family etc) present a drink offering (Schnapps is the preferred drink) to the woman's father while stating their intention. A date is set after this ceremony where the man's family returns to inquire about the bride price/dowry. The father's acceptance of the drink signifies an acknowledgement that the woman is spoken for and the couple has been officially recognized as 'dating'.

'Dating' is not only between the couple but between their families as well. It is during this time that the woman's family makes enquiries about the man's family, their background, financial status, their treatment of women, the presence/absence of inheritable diseases in the family etc. If the woman's family is satisfied with this pseudo-background check, they keep the drinks and provide '*the list*' which consists of items that make up the dowry to the man's family. A date is then set to commemorate the marriage. On the other hand, if the woman's family is unsatisfied with the results of their investigations, (ex: they find out that most men in the family are alcoholics or that family has a history of madness or that men die at a very early age in the family, etc), they return the drinks and provide a suitable excuse as to why the match cannot be possible.

'*The list*' is at the discretion of each particular family, however common amongst most are; alcoholic beverages, jewelry, cloth/clothing, items that a woman needs to start a household- pots and pans, sewing machine, plates, bed sheets, cloth etc and the infamous '*akonta sikan*' (brother-in-law-cutlass: this used to be a cutlass given to brother of the bride to compensate him for the '*loss*' of his sister, however currently it is some form of monetary compensation).

The marriage ceremony itself is held usually in the late morning, where members of both families and friends gather to witness the ceremony. It is usually held in the woman's (bride's) house, and her parents/family is responsible for provision of refreshments and housing of any guests that have travelled far.

The ceremony begins with the spokesperson for the bride's family ('*okyeame*') introducing him or herself, stating the purpose of the gathering and welcoming the groom's family. A prayer is said to begin the ceremony (this can be '*pouring of libation*', a Christian/Muslim prayer or both depending on the religious bent of the families).



Figure 1: Presentation and inspection of gifts

Dialogue occurs mainly between the ‘*okyeames*’ from both families. The groom’s family presents their ‘gifts’ – which are the items on ‘*the list*’, these items are inspected and accepted by the bride’s family. There is a lot of fanfare that occurs during these presentations including detailed descriptions of an item and its significance. For example, the ‘*okyeame*’ from the groom’s family may describe a piece of cloth as follows: This cloth is real *Kente*, we went all the way to *Bonwire* (this is the birthplace of *Kente* weaving) and commissioned a master artist to design this particular cloth to duplicate the loveliness, grace and beauty of the bride. The ‘*okyeame*’ may also haggle with the brother’s in law as to desired ‘*akonta sikan*’. During all these proceedings, neither the bride nor the groom is present.

After the presentation of gifts, the ‘*okyeame*’ from the groom’s family enquires after the bride. Usually, the bride’s family sends her sisters or female cousins firsts and a playful banter occurs before the bride is finally ushered into the room amidst singing and dancing. The groom’s entrance follows the brides’.



Figure 2: Entrance of Bride and Groom

With both the bride and groom present, the bride’s father asks his daughter thrice whether she knows the groom and if she is willing to marry him. The bride must provide a verbal affirmative response to her father’s question for the ceremony to proceed. (Since these events are usually planned in advance, this aspect has become merely ceremonial---similar to the part in Christian marriages where the priests asks if anyone knows of any reason why the marriage should not occur---therefore, an affirmative answer is expected and is mostly received. I believe that were a negative response received, the marriage ceremony will not commence although I personally, have not heard of such a thing happening before.)

Once the bride confirms her willingness to be married, the two are joined by their hands and a representative from each family blesses the union. Following the blessing, are festivities, eating, drinking, dancing and drumming—usually till daybreak.



Figure 3: The Bride and the Groom