

Cajun Weddings

by Jane Vidrine

What do you think of when you hear the word “wedding”? Maybe you imagine a bejeweled bride in a long, white gown and fluffy veil—or a yellow sari. Maybe you envision standing under a *chupa* or see yourself with hennaed hands. Think of the weddings you have seen. Were there mountains of food, gifts, music, attendants, vows, processions? What are the things that make weddings special? Marriage and weddings are rites of passage found in cultures all over the world. The ways that people mark this important life step differ from culture to culture, from place to place, and even from person to person.

Weddings among the Cajun people of Louisiana have customs distinctive to that culture, but they also have many features in common with weddings in other cultures. They offer a jumping-off point for examining how different cultures celebrate marriage.

Allons à Lafayette

The Cajuns of southwest Louisiana have many very old wedding traditions that people still practice today.

Allons à Lafayette

Let's go to Lafayette

Allons changer ton nom...

Let's go change your name...

The words to the first Cajun song ever recorded, in 1928 by Joe and Cleoma Falcon, speak of going to Lafayette to get married. Until the oil boom of the 1930s, roads and bridges were poor and rural Cajun communities were isolated. Churches and courthouses were few and far between, so couples had to go to the big town of Lafayette to get their marriage license, or wait weeks for a circuit-riding Roman Catholic priest to come to them. In the old days, a couple would “jump the broom” held by family and friends to make the marriage legal until a priest could come. Older people tell stories of agreements between the parents of the bride and groom about property, livestock, and money. People who wanted to marry published news at the church so someone who objected could speak before the marriage took place. Although some customs of the past are not practiced anymore, we hear about them in stories and songs, such as this complaint:

Je voudrais bien me marier...

I want to get married...

L'argent a conté, les bans a publié

There's money to count, notices to publish

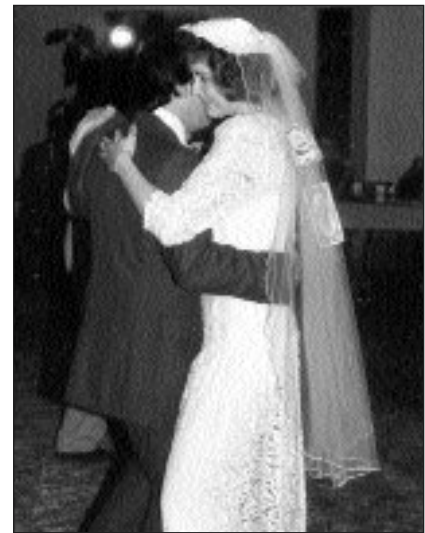
Tous ça me gêne !...

All that bothers me !...

—Sung by the Magnolia Sisters,
collected from Edius Naquin

Cajuns celebrate a wedding with a dance or reception. In French, a wedding dance is called “*La Bal de Noce*.” Before public dancehalls became popular gathering places for Cajuns, the *bal de noce* was held at home, but now weddings are usually at public halls. A very beautiful tradition that the Cajuns have is the wedding march. Before the Cajun band begins to play for everyone to dance, the dance floor is cleared. The bride and groom hold hands and walk slowly around the room while the band plays a special song just for this march. Then, the guests get a partner and join in the march until everyone is following the bride and groom. After the march, the bride and groom dance a waltz in the middle while everyone watches. Then they dance with their parents. After that, everybody can dance. To get a dance with the bride or groom, it is traditional to pin money on the bride's veil or on the groom's suit to help ensure that they have some money to start their life together.

Singing songs to toast, or *fête*, the couple is another old tradition. Few people



As Jane and John Vidrine danced on their wedding day, guests pinned money to her veil to help them start their life together.

Family photo courtesy of Jane Vidrine

sing these songs today, so most of them are lost. One of these songs is “*La Fleur de la Jeunesse*” (The Flower of Youth). It is a lament or sad song that tells of the sweet sadness of getting married.

J'avais promis dans ma jeunesse

I promised in my youth

Que je m'aurais jamais marier...

That I would never marry...

C'est aujourd'hui que ma tête

est couronnée Please turn to page 16

Lesson Ideas

A wedding is a rite of passage familiar to most students and common to most cultures. Students will have a lot to say about weddings, and may also have strong opinions about the “right” and “wrong” way that weddings should be celebrated. The purpose of this article and the activities is to encourage students to

- Recognize wedding traditions and rituals as rites of passage,
- Explore wedding customs in their families and communities, and
- Validate cultural differences and similarities by comparing and contrasting traditions of different cultures.

Teachers may wish to “chunk” the article for different reading comprehension levels and to read it aloud. Logical chunks are historical traditions, contemporary traditions, and shared traditions.

1. After reading, brainstorm a list of all the traditions mentioned in the article.

Have students categorize the list into those they knew about and those that were new. Complete one “I learned” statement per student.

2. Have students act out the Cajun wedding march as described in the article to a slow Cajun recording (in 2/4 time).

3. Have students illustrate the progression of events at a wedding in a storyboard or with a computer slide show.

4. Have students interview their elders about family wedding traditions and then compare their findings with those of classmates and with the traditions in the article. After more research about weddings in their community and in other times and places, students can organize a class wedding traditions exhibit. Be sure to include music!

5. As a cumulative writing activity, have students write a short essay addressing “What is a rite of passage?” using what they know about wedding traditions as examples.

Cajun Weddings

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But today my head is crowned
Et mon coeur est orné d'un bouquet...
And my heart is adorned with flowers
Adieu la fleur de la jeunesse
Goodbye to the flower of youth
La noble qualité de vie (bis)
The noble quality of life (repeat)
C'est aujourd'hui que je veux la quitter.
Today I want to leave it behind.

—Sung by the Magnolia Sisters,
remembered by Sylvan Aguillard

Cajuns know how to have fun with each other, too. It is a custom that if a younger brother or sister marries before the older one, then the older one must dance with a mop or broom while everyone watches. In the little town of Mamou, they even have to dance in a tub of water with the mop. This is a way of poking fun at the older one for still being single. Another bit of fun is called *charivari* (sha-ree-va-rée). When the bride or groom has been widowed or divorced, family and friends interrupt the wedding night by banging loud pots and pans outside their window. The company does not stop the noise until they are invited in for something to drink and eat. This is a playful way of honoring the new couple.

The food at Cajun weddings is usually homemade, prepared by the bride's family for all the invited guests. A huge gumbo

with fresh chicken and sausage in a spicy brown soup served over rice is traditional, along with sandwiches and other finger-foods. Also traditional is a white wedding cake cut by the married couple and a chocolate groom's cake cut by the groom's godfather or *parrain*.

Shared Traditions

You know you are at a Cajun wedding—when you see customs such as the wedding march, gumbo, and *charivari*. But Cajuns share wedding traditions with other cultures, too: pinning money on the veil, believing that the bride should wear “something old, something new, something borrowed, something blue”; the bride being walked down the aisle by her father; the groom not seeing the bride in her wedding gown on the day of the wedding; throwing the bouquet; removing the garter; sharing bites of cake and sips of wine; decorating cars with soap messages and tin can noise makers; throwing rice or bird seed at the couple to wish them a good send-off.

All wedding traditions mark the important step in life that the newly married couple is taking. They may be new or old. They may be unique to one culture or shared by many. But they are all done for a reason. They help to bond people and families together and celebrate this rite of passage.

Jane Vidrine is the Education Coordinator for Louisiana Voices and a public school music teacher. She also performs with the Magnolia Sisters. Find recordings at www.magnoliasisters.com.