

# Weddings and the Mandingo Tribe

By Sainabu Manneh



The “Mandingo” is an ethnic group that lives primarily in West Africa: The Gambia, Mali, Senegal, Guinea Bissau and Burkina Faso. They originated from Mali. They migrated west in search of better agricultural lands. During this expansion, they established their own empire called Kaabu. They have one of the richest cultures in Africa whether in tradition, music or rituals. They are predominantly farmers but they also are business owners, taxi drivers, civil servants and even presidents.

The oldest male is usually the head of the household. Households are organized based on clan groups. The women are usually housewives and mothers though some of them still work in the fields. The primary religion is Islam but they have inculcated their culture into the religion to the extent that it is difficult to differentiate between the two. Take weddings for example. The religion teaches that the actual marriage happens in a mosque or in a religious setting and it takes about an hour or two. The bride and groom do not have to be present. The groom can be in Timbuktu and the bride in Australia. The fathers, uncles, brothers and other male family members or friends of the bride and groom meet to perform the marriage. A handshake between two people, one from each side and a recitation from the Quran seals the union. The rest is cultural.

Mandingo weddings are often a family affair involving the two families, which in some cases are all related somehow. Sometimes, the two fathers would have arranged these unions years ago. This tradition has been very prevalent in their community but even though it still exists, it is fading away due to the exposure to outside civilizations and modern education. In any case whether arranged or not, the parents (usually the fathers and uncles) would check on the suitability of the marriage by digging in family history, religion and sometimes physical attributes. In the case of arranged marriages, girls at a very young age are trained on how to be the best wives. This training would involve dress codes, speech, cooking and even intimacy. An example of these lessons being that a wife has to kneel when she greets or offers her husband a drink. This is done as a sign of respect.

The ceremony itself is both traditional and religious. The father and uncles of the groom would bring to the mosque some kola nuts, soft drinks and money. The kola nut is considered sacred and is used for all sacred ceremonies from weddings, christenings and funerals. It is used as a gesture of hospitality and respect. It is also believed that some people use it as some form of aphrodisiac. The drinks are gifts for the bride’s family as some form of consolation because they are losing

their daughter to another family and the money is given to the bride as dowry handed to the bride's uncle, which is later on distributed between the bride's mother and aunts. Men attend the religious ceremony at the mosque only, although nowadays men do attend the other festivities also. It is then extended by the women to days of very elaborate dresses, celebration and rituals.

The "Mandingo" is known for their rich oral history, which is passed down through generations by the family griots who sing the family songs of praise. They are known for their unique music and instruments like the "kora" and "balafon". The kora looks a little like a guitar and the "balafon" looks like a xylophone. The bride if present would dress in white and would be seated in the middle of the crowd where she will receive gifts and praises. There is also a lot of dancing and singing. The women usually attend this part of the festivities and it goes on until about midnight.

At this time, the bride is taken to the back by her aunts who would then give her a traditional bath believed to purify her before she is handed over to her husband. The bath is usually accompanied with farewell-like songs. She is then dressed in a white nightgown with a white veil. This indicates the new life she is about to enter where a woman is to dress respectfully and cover the parts of her body, which should only be visible to her husband. From the bathroom, she is led to the middle of the compound where the community elders usually married men and women are sitting around a mat waiting for the bride to get ready. When she finally makes it to the mat, a prayer is said for her and the elders would throw in a few pieces of advice on how to run her new home and how to have a successful marriage.

From here she is led to her husband's house through a ritual. Her paternal aunt would put her (the bride) on her (aunt's) back and the walk begins to her husband. Brides are treated like princesses and that is the reason why she is on somebody's back. This practice is now very rare because in olden days, brides were much younger and lighter than in the present day. Once they get to the husband's house, which is usually a short distance, another session of advice takes place, this time from the bride's aunts to the husband. The message usually is to treat her with kindness and respect. This ends the ceremony. Everyone goes home after this and hopefully the bride and groom live happily ever after.