

family ties

AFRICAN AND CARIBBEAN TRADITIONS

BY ROSALIND CUMMINGS-YEATES

mists of burning frankincense and myrrh swirl around a man draped in gold and white. He pours a clear liquid onto the floor, murmuring, "Mama Charity, Papa Joseph."

This was how my wedding to Jerome began last December, with a libation ceremony: The liquid, symbolizing purity, was poured in honor of our ancestors. The officiant called our deceased grandparents by name and said a prayer, asking the guests to join in by saying *ase* (so it may be) after each line. The frankincense and myrrh burned in honor of the African ritual of clearing the air before an important occasion. Adding African and Caribbean customs to our wedding personalized the celebration, lending it the rich cultural experiences of our ancestors.

RITUALS

Africa is a continent with 50 different countries and hundreds of ethnic groups. Even so, there are common traditions. "Three tenets hold true in most African cultures," says Harriette Cole, author of *Jumping the Broom: The African-American Wedding Planner* (Henry Holt and Compa-

ny, 1995). "First, both families must extend their permission. Second, the wedding joins not just the couple, but their families as well. Third, the wedding feast is served to the entire community, announcing that a new family has been formed."

In fact, African culture and tradition is primarily about community. Terri and Kendall Glover of St. Louis had their families exchange kola nuts and palm wine. "It's part of the Nigerian betrothal ritual, but we used it to welcome our extended family," says Terri.

The most popular African-American tradition is jumping the broom, a custom traced back to slavery. "Our ancestors didn't have any legal rights, including marriage," says Cole. "They knew they had to create a new tradition of celebrating a union. They took the broom, a universal household symbol, and jumped over it."

CLOTHES

You might choose to add simple accents to your clothes, like an African-print vest for the groom and a matching head wrap for yourself. Or go all out with an African-fabric gown or ensemble (blouse, skirt, and head wrap).

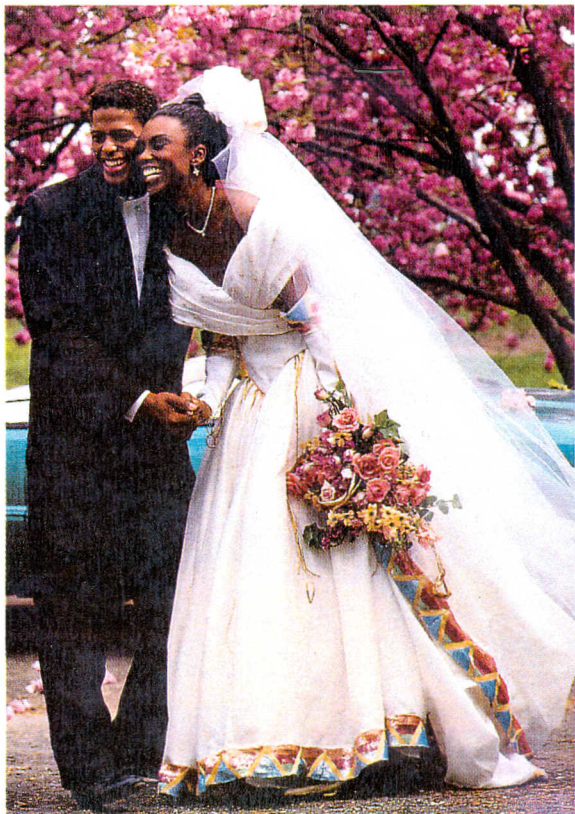
African cloth is perfect for decorations, too: Use it for the aisle runner and tablecloths, or drape it around the reception entrance. *Kente* cloth, from Ghana, is commonly used in the U.S.; *aso-oke*, a hand-woven Nigerian fabric reserved for special occasions,

is another good option. Consider using cloths that represent your families. "Think of African cloth like plaid or tartan," says Cole. "There's a different plaid for each clan in Scotland; it's the same in Africa." You can research cloths and their meanings in books on African culture, museums, and some specialized fabric stores.

FOOD AND MUSIC

Food and music play prominent roles in all African celebrations. Southern fare such as jambalaya, candied sweet potatoes, and fried chicken often graces African-American reception tables. Also on the menu: West-African *jollof* (rice in a rich meat sauce), or *garri* (a pounded cassava-root dish). A Caribbean wedding feast can include curried or jerk chicken, rice and beans, plantains, salted fish, and beef.

Gospel music is a ceremony tradition in African-American culture regardless of religion: Think classic tunes from Mahalia Jackson or contemporary songs by the Winans. Some couples incorporate fertility dances or ceremonial chants into the festivities. Legendary South African songstress Miriam Makeba or Senegal's Youssou N'Dour can add a touch of the continent to your reception; jazz, blues, calypso, and reggae are also popular. Add African dancers and drummers to the mix for an unforgettable party.



customizing your wedding

- Research—delve into family photo albums, talk to older relatives, and scour history books and museum collections for customs that are significant to the two of you.
- Don't want to make a sweeping statement? Simply engrave African symbols (an ankh, for example) on your wedding rings, include African proverbs on your invitations, or use an African museum or art gallery as your reception site.
- Celebrate family: Have a senior family member read a psalm or poem; honor deceased relatives with a libation ceremony.
- Explain ceremony customs in your wedding program.