

SOME CULTURAL PRACTICES IN VIETNAMESE AND AMERICAN WEDDINGS

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Abstract

This article investigates the similarities and differences between Vietnamese and American weddings. Two articles “Vietnamese Weddings: From Marx to Market” by Nguyen and Belk (2012) and “Our Family Functions: Functions of Traditional Weddings for Modern Brides and Postmodern Families” by Barnes (2014) are used to analyze as evidence of traditional weddings in each country because of their detailed records of wedding components. Based on these records of wedding rituals, ceremonies, and practices, the author has highlighted the similarities and differences in the two wedding cultures, which may provide a great contribution to second language learners and teachers to avoid embarrassing cross-cultural situations in life, especially in weddings of these two cultures.

Keywords: Ceremonies, cultural rituals, differences, similarities, wedding.

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MỘT SỐ TẬP TỤC VĂN HÓA TRONG Đám CƯỚI CỦA NGƯỜI VIỆT VÀ NGƯỜI MỸ

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Tóm tắt

Bài viết nghiên cứu những điểm tương đồng và khác biệt giữa đám cưới của người Việt và người Mỹ. Hai bài báo “Đám cưới Việt Nam: Từ Marx đến thị trường” của Nguyen và Belk (2012) và “Chức năng của gia đình chúng ta: Chức năng của đám cưới truyền thống đối với cơ cấu hiện đại và gia đình hậu hiện đại” của Barnes (2014) được sử dụng để phân tích làm bằng chứng cho đám cưới truyền thống ở Việt Nam và Mỹ vì các bài báo này ghi chép chi tiết về các yếu tố trong đám cưới. Thông qua các ghi chép về nghi thức, nghi lễ, tập tục đám cưới này đã giúp nêu lên những điểm tương đồng cũng như khác biệt trong văn hóa đám cưới của Việt và người Mỹ. Điều này góp phần hữu ích lớn cho người học và người dạy ngoại ngữ thứ hai để tránh được các tình huống giao văn hóa khó xử trong cuộc sống, đặc biệt trong các đám cưới của hai nền văn hóa này.

Từ khóa: Đám cưới, giống nhau, khác nhau, nghi lễ, tục lệ văn hóa.

1. Introduction

Marriage as a significant and necessary component of various cultures throughout the world becomes an important and indispensable part of every person's life as well as in every society. To explore the history and development of a society, one can learn through the study of that society's wedding culture. In addition to the specific cultural features, in the global trend of cross-cultural communication, the wedding customs and practices of one country can affect the ones of another country. All of this cultural and cross-cultural knowledge may be used to deal with the culture shock and dilemma. The purpose of this article is to research and compare the cultural characteristics of Vietnamese and American weddings through actual practices in order to discuss the differences in marriage between these two cultures.

2. Literature review

Marriage is a concept that has existed and evolved over the years to signify different meanings. In the ancient time, to wed was to pledge oneself to another and establish a new life as one (Dent, 2004) no matter what country it takes place in, no matter what culture it is part of. According to Westermarck (1936, p. 3), it is provisionally defined as “a relation of one or more men to one or more women that is recognized by custom or law”. Therefore, it's clear that getting married is considered a memorable moment and a turning point in an adult's life all over the world. This is the premises on which children are born and forging relations are built. Weddings mark the transition of one's life from one stage to the next and redefine one's social and personal identity. Wedding rituals or rites have been guided by various cultural values and processes (Rook, 1985), which appear to be comparatively immovable parts of practices for preserving and promoting the immutable construction of the sociocultural system.

The institutions of marriage are recorded in history and different cultures have different wedding customs and practices. As stated by Hofstede (2010), Eastern societies tend to be collectivist while individualism more frequently characterizes Western cultures. Weddings reflect this cultural pattern. Collectivism and individualism differ greatly in their emphasis on the feelings and opinions of group members as well as the psychological closeness between a person and others (Brislin, 2004).

As one of the oriental eastern society, the concept of marriage in Vietnam has a different meaning. It is seen as a social event that embraces practical and financial values such as a continuation of the family line. It also reflects the development of communal networks, especially, through the great changes in Vietnamese weddings after 1975. Furthermore, it is considered a sanctuary later for old age, meaning that the elderly will depend on their children born after marriage. Sometimes, it is about transferring property from one generation to the next in Vietnam. The union of two different people from two different families in the love relationship will continue the property or part of the posterity of the former sages. With regards to American weddings, each couple focuses on the personal meaning of their wedding. Therefore, their wedding reflects both the bride and groom's personalities only. Weddings of American people are influenced by British culture and Christianity. The ceremony is considered an important way to receive blessings from God. It is claimed that the holy definition of marriage is contained in Genesis (Lestapis, 1962). The Bible (1984) states that the Lord God made a woman from the rib he had taken out of the man, and he brought her to the man. From this perspective, marriage is created by God and should be in front of God; therefore, weddings should be performed by a pastor.

3. Method

Being a broad and complex conception, wedding culture is analyzed into different aspects such as wedding procedure, decoration, wedding costumes, receptions, atmosphere, and rituals that are closely related to the wedding ceremony. The sources of information on Vietnamese and American wedding rituals used for research in this article is from the articles “Vietnamese Weddings: From Marx to Market” by Nguyen and Belk (March, 2012) and “Our Family Functions: Functions of Traditional Weddings for Modern Brides and Postmodern Families” by Barnes (2014). Distinct elements of Vietnamese and American weddings drawn out from these two sources consist of wedding procedure, decoration, dress, banquet atmosphere, and rituals, which are then interpreted.

4. Findings

4.1. Similarities between Vietnamese and American wedding practices

Table 1. Similarities in Vietnamese and American weddings

Vietnam	America
Weddings are a means to display their status	Weddings are opportunities for families to demonstrate their wealth and status
Wedding consumption may worsen their quality of life	Couples are willing to go into debt to pay for an extravagant wedding
Kinship and friendship are the bonds that bring guests to weddings	It's an important time to reconnect and reinforce social ties with extended family members

Over the past decades, dramatic economic and political changes in Vietnam have had profound impacts on social life and customs including the wedding customs and practices. Vietnamese people establish their individual and family identities through consumption and wedding practices. They take wedding planning seriously and try their best to have the grandest wedding since weddings become a means for a couple and their family to demonstrate their status in society as well as to show that their family is not inferior to their acquaintances in the local area. Some families are willing to spend billions of Vietnamese Dong (hundreds of thousands dollars) for a wedding or decorate reception sites with imported items such as expensive fresh orchids. For a classy wedding, wedding costs can have a detrimental impact on couples and their families. Sometimes it becomes a burden for couples making their quality of life worse because later on they have to work hard to pay off the debt they incurred during their wedding.

Getting married in America is a public commitment to a long-term relationship. The wedding is where the couple's family and friends witness their marriage and enhance the publicity and enforcement of that marriage. Couples are drawn to weddings as a way to demonstrate their social prestige. The increase in wedding costs also provides a significant opportunity for the families to show off their wealth and status. Even lavish weddings may glorify the institution of marriage, elevate the status of the participants, and have a special appeal to the couples. However, the increasing popularity of expensive, formal weddings in recent decades has been found by scholars to be the cause of massive debt among couples and their parents.

Based on the data provided in Table 1 it can be determined that there are only some similarities in procedures relating to Vietnamese and American weddings.

In Vietnam, weddings are an opportunity to bond family and friendship and the number of guests attending the wedding determines the scale of the wedding. Similarly, in America weddings are an important time to reconnect and strengthen social ties and family members, whose presence is really an integral aspect of weddings and plays a vital role.

4.2. Differences between Vietnamese and American wedding practices

In addition to the similarities in Vietnamese and American wedding customs mentioned above, these two cultures have many other differences based on the data provided in Table 2.

The state and local scholars proclaim that some wedding rituals are the foundation of Vietnamese cultural identity. Bride prices, the matching horoscopes of the bride and the groom, and consultation with a fortune-teller to choose an auspicious date for marriage seem to be traditional and unique in Vietnamese wedding customs. And the role of the parents of both families plays a very important role in organizing the wedding. Meanwhile, choosing wedding dates in the US does not exist. To decide when to have the wedding date, couples often rely on their personal calendar framework. There may be a wide range in the amount of planning a wedding and the final decision mostly made by the groom. Many couples may have to wait a long time for a formal marriage and even have children before having a wedding. Furthermore, to prepare for a successful wedding, there are many websites sponsored by wedding-related businesses in Vietnam while in America, couples proactively set up websites to serve around their necessary wedding activities.

Table 2. Differences in Vietnamese and American weddings

Vietnam	America
Couples choose an auspicious date for marriage	Couples see weddings through an individual framework, and even wait longer before getting married.
Parents control over marriage and weddings	There is a wide range in the amount of planning and decisions made by the groom.
There are numerous websites sponsored by wedding-related businesses	Couples have their own personal wedding website
A dancing performance to highlight the appearance of the couple marching down an aisle and up to the stage is followed by pouring champagne, cutting the wedding cake, and lighting candles.	A long white dress, flowers, music, a clergy member, attendants in matching clothing, and a ceremony with a ring exchange is followed by a reception with a tiered cake
Successful weddings help to feel the good affection of the weddings' attendance	It is believed that having a successful marriage does not end in divorce
The groom's family provides nuptial gifts for the bride's family	A long-stem single roses are given to groom and bride's parents or close relatives
The bride and the groom share a piece of trầu (betel leaf) with cau (areca nut)	A husband and wife each take a lit candle and together light a more elaborate center candle

Vietnamese weddings include a series of ceremonies and wedding parties. The wedding ceremony is the solemn and spiritual part of the wedding while the wedding party is a big festivity. Weddings often include traditional Vietnamese outfits and dance to Vietnamese country-side music or recitations of folk poetry. The couple then walks down the aisle and onto the stage. They perform creative ceremonies such as pouring champagne, cutting the wedding cake, and lighting candles. Before the wedding takes place, the organizers often show a clip with the couple's wedding photos for those who arrive early. They will watch a clip with background music while waiting. Meanwhile in American weddings there is always a long white dress, flowers, music, a clergyman, attendants in matching clothing, and a ring exchange ceremony, followed by a reception with a tiered cake. In the wedding, the American bride often invites her father to lead her down the aisle, but sometimes she invites both her father and mother, which provides a visible symbol that both parents are important in the bride's life without her having to verbalize it.

A successful wedding in Vietnam helps wedding attendees feel good and satisfied with the couple as well as their families. Meanwhile, Americans believe that a successful wedding can bring a happy and fulfilling marriage to couples.

Some other interesting wedding differences between Vietnamese and American cultures can also

be seen in the practice of giving gifts at the wedding ceremony. In Vietnamese weddings, the groom's family often has the view that they must bring gifts to the bride's family. People often ask close friends or relatives who are young and single to bring wedding gifts to the bride's family. Ideally, the bride's side would provide carrier girls and the groom's side would provide carrier boys during this gift-receiving ceremony. Meanwhile, in America, the rose ceremony serves as an opportunity for the bride and groom expressing gratitude to the special people attending it; then give those who they want to thank long-stem single roses often wrapped with ribbons. These grateful people may be the couples' mothers or some of their family members who are especially close to them.

Last but not least, to increase the unique identity of the two cultures through adding rites in wedding practices, the last two ones in Table 2 are truly unique and impressive. In Vietnamese weddings, there is a practice of sharing betel and areca nuts of the bride and groom, which is considered as wedding gifts and symbolizes the close husband-wife relationship. The bride and groom open the tray of betel and areca nuts together. Then the groom picks two areca nuts, which are the symbols of husband and wife. The bride picks four betel leaves, which represent the four virtues of women: công, dung, ngôn, hạnh (work, beautiful appearance, appropriate speech, and appropriate behavior). This is truly the unique traditional ceremony found only in Vietnamese weddings. Also, the Unity

Candle ceremony in American weddings also brings an equally interesting and impressive characteristic. The couple in the ceremony each takes a lit candle and together light a more elaborate center candle, which may be suggested to represent the following things including that (1) couples like the religious symbolism of two halves becoming whole and that (2) using white candles and candlelight in the ceremony appear romantic to the couples. Moreover, performing the ceremony serves as a way of including their parents in the wedding. In a common variation of the ceremony, the couple takes their parents or only their mothers to the altar to light their "individual" candles before the bride and groom light the center candle together, which also shows that the couple wants to give them some kind of special role in the lighting of it.

5. Implication

From the data collected above, many customs and practices are highlighted through comparison between Vietnamese and American weddings. These wedding similarities and differences include wedding organization, date selection, guests, costumes, and typical rituals and procedures. Second language teachers must understand the purpose and needs of intercultural communicative education. It is really imperative for second language teachers to understand the purpose and needs of intercultural communicative education. Especially, language teachers have to know about some shared common values and traditions (Spradlin, 2008) as well as to get some of the differences. Also from the perspective of second language acquisition, Hernández (2010) argues that it is essential for abroad study programs for language learning to provide both language education and cultural learning. Thus, from an intercultural perspective, teacher training should be aware of the impact of cultural factors in the classroom, which can help students adapt to globalization trends.

6. Conclusion

Besides the similarities in the weddings, there are many differences between Vietnamese and American weddings. There are many factors that play a role in these differences. These factors range from cultural patterns, historical and cultural origins, religion, beliefs, and values of love and marriage. They are expressed through the typical wedding procedures and rituals of the two cultures, which thereby highlight the similarities and differences in Vietnamese and American wedding culture.

Marriage is an important and indispensable part of each person's culture. By comparing the differences in wedding customs between Vietnamese and American weddings, one can better understand these customs differences and how they are caused by cultural dichotomies. If one can interact with or attend a wedding in either of these countries, it would be beneficial to understand the culture related to the various components of the wedding.

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