

A Day in the Life...

Cultural Practices: Marriage - Part 1

Dear Friends,

In the next several months of this year I will be taking you on a journey to experience, as it were, some aspects of African, and in particular, Ghanaian culture so you may have some insight into our way of life. As our recurring title "A Day in the Life" suggests, this series will be a way of helping you understand our way of life as Ghanaians, of which Akrampa, is no exception.

My intention is to discuss cultural practices that are important to our way of life. I want to begin the series by discussing how marriage is approached, and contracted, in the ethnic group - the AKANS of Ghana - to which the people of Akrampa belong.

In the early days, parents did the 'search' for spouses for their children. Or the male child would seek the consent of his father to look for a woman to marry, by himself, or to invite his father to look for a wife for him. The age for getting married has changed over the years, due to issues like completing education, but now children average between age 21 & age 28 when they get married.

The traditional position is that it's the father of the man who should marry for his child. If it is the parents initiative, the children being considered would be unaware of what is happening on their behalf. The parents determined for the children that they are ready to settle down with a husband/wife, and proceeded to look for and decide on who should be their child's spouse. The society had a system in place to determine what should be acceptable as a 'bride price'. If the woman in question never went to school, the 'bride price' was less than if she were educated. The children involved in all of this would then be informed of the choice made and there was rarely any opposition to the decision and choice of the parents. It was the father's responsibility to organize the resources and 'pay' the bride price. This practice is still current, although there are ethnic and tribal/clan variations. Some do choose to 'rebel' by not 'seeking' the consent, nor letting their parents choose for them. They just walk in one day and announce to parents and friends that, "I'm marrying so and so, and that's it!"

When the above - search and choice - have taken place and there is satisfaction and agreement, the parents would then discuss the details of the marriage and the children are informed by their respective parents. The children would then be introduced to each other for the very first time. In the other alternative where the son approaches the father and seeks consent to look for his own bride, and the consent is given, he would have to let his father do the investigation to determine whether or not the woman being sought after is acceptable to the parents. In this instance, the son may not insist on his choice if the parents do not approve.

There is nothing like a dating period. Rather, the father of the male will present what is commonly known as a 'knocking fee.' When this is accepted by the woman's parents, then a kind of 'betrothal' is assumed to have taken place. Until or unless the son decides otherwise, the parents of the daughter may not give their daughter in marriage to another. During the period of 'waiting' the woman may not become pregnant, because the rites for formal binding to each other as man and wife have not been done. Pregnancy before marriage was discouraged then, and still is in many communities. Indeed, the value of the 'bride price' hinges on the virginity of the maiden.

Next month I will describe the marriage ceremony itself.