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Personalizing the Wedding: A Cross-Cultural Study of Wedding Motivations in the Keralite Indian and Southern American Communities

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PERSONALIZING THE WEDDING: A CROSS CULTURAL STUDY OF
WEDDING MOTIVATIONS IN THE KERALITE INDIAN AND
SOUTHERN AMERICAN COMMUNITIES

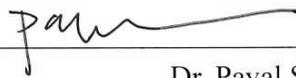
By

Juliet Joseph and Katie Alexander

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of
the Requirements for Graduation
with Honors from the South
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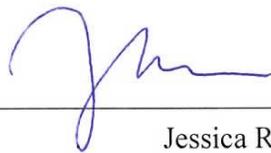
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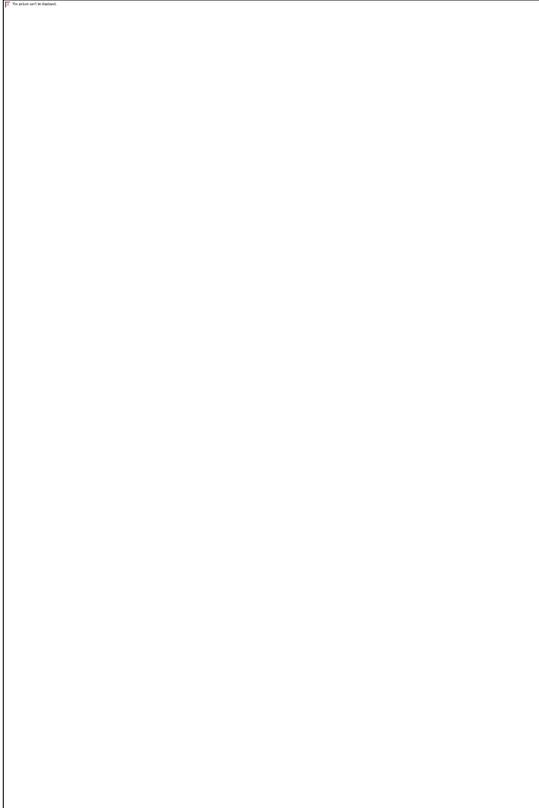
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Thesis Summary

The purpose of this senior thesis project was to qualitatively analyze weddings and bridal motivations within the Southern culture of America and the Keralite culture of India to better explore the role the wedding ceremony and its many components may play. As two undergraduate students of the University of South Carolina, we used contacts within our familial units and university organizations to explore our interests within these wedding cultures. Having had personal experiences as a guest to weddings within our own cultures, we observed the widely changing wedding culture which sparked in us a desire to explore more about the cross-cultural divergences and/or commonalities with our individual cultures. As we conversed over our experiences within our individual communities regarding their wedding cultures, we were motivated to explore more about these two very variant, yet merging cultures.

The two cultures we explored were the Southern American community and the Keralite Indian community, cultures we were raised in individually. Observations, questionnaire responses, and anecdotal conversations ultimately allowed us to draw conclusions on common themes which consistently developed in our analysis. Because of the limitations in the number of participants and a lack of diversity within our pool of participants within our analysis, we understand that our findings cannot be generalized to wedding trends nationally or globally. Nevertheless, our findings develop common literature review concepts as well as guide possible directions for future, more detailed research. Some of the findings we developed using our analysis were trends of personalization within the weddings, appropriation of more responsibility by the couple, existence of consistent stress exchanged for ultimate relief, and familial involvement. These findings ultimately led us to

develop our understanding of the culminating role of the wedding: validation of the couple's relationship by family and friends.



Introduction

The pews are full, the flowers are set, the candles are lit, the groom is in place. The notes from the classic Canon in D begin, the few chords that signify that something special is to happen. The doors are about to open, I ask “Are you ready to walk down that aisle?” The woman in delicate white next to her father looks back at me and says, “I’ve never been more ready” and with that I open the grand doors of the steeple and she walks down the aisle into a new chapter, becoming someone’s wife.

Vibrant colors cover every visible corner of the church. Indian clothing in all of its fashion adorns the large crowd. The bridal party has a different style: white, lace gown, worn by the bride, silver, off the shoulder dresses for the bridesmaids, red suspenders and bowties for the groomsmen, etc. They’re dressed unlike the crowd, yet they seem compatible. The tradition in the ceremony seems untouched, yet it presents as uniquely different. For the older generation, enough familiarity. For the modern generation, enough renovation.

The wedding ceremony has long been an integral part of marriage and society. The wedding can be a meeting place, a beginning, a transfer, a show, etc. These roles are not exclusive from each other and can be exemplified across cultures as shown by Sneizek (2005). Weddings are inherently more than tradition. Evolution of these traditions so heavily instilled in cultures and its importance are the characteristics that define the wedding industry and its development. Different aspects of a wedding point to the many intricacies of a seemingly simple ceremony. Weddings are not just a short-lived, isolated affair with minimal influences. For most of history, the marriage has been a financial transaction between two families. A transaction that allowed authentication of heirs and fashioned a functional familial unit. However, these rites have inevitably been intertwined with material, social, financial, and consumer contexts. A once modest affair has become a grand tradition with all of its accompanying components. The grandeur of the wedding developed by the wedding industry may then influence the wedding's foundational roles. Moreover, religious values, social status, financial standing, and cultural traditions have inescapably influenced the wedding industry. And the impact of Westernization cross culture is apparent. Changes are evident within the motivations behind weddings, the grandiosity of ceremonies, the extravagance of gowns, the intricacy of cakes, the selection of the venue, and the picture-perfect bridal party. These white wedding essentials that were once characteristic of the Western world have undeniably permeated various other wedding cultures. The array of wedding activities undoubtedly have threads of influence, rooted in familial suggestions, global trends, and media depictions. Nevertheless, at the heart of the vibrant event of a

wedding ceremony is the celebration of love, family, tradition, and community. This celebration manifests in how the wedding ceremony develops and is enjoyed.

In this study, the structure of the wedding ceremony, its content, and purposes are analyzed in order to better understand motivations and the very need and desire to have the various wedding elements. Drawing upon participant observation and formal and informal interviews, cultural interactions and transformations were explored within the the Keralite Indian and Southern Indian communities. Analysis of these interactions and common trends were then used to better understand motivations behind the wedding and its primary purpose for the couple.

Literature Review

Literature looking at the cultural impact and evolution of the wedding industry has revealed varying aspects of importance within the wedding and how it emphasizes certain values and areas of significances for the couple. Focusing research on Southern American cultural history alongside Keralite wedding culture provides an interesting context to apply to research on the wedding ceremony itself. Self-representation, as well as family traditions, is often an integral component of bringing together the wedding ceremony and the decisions that precede it. The myriad of elements that build a wedding, such as decorations, clothing, bridal party etc, have important significances for the couple, their culture, and the production of the event itself. These elements often vary across societies as cultures, community significances, and locations differ. However, it is important to note that, cultures may also often have similar features due to interactions or parallel trends cross cultures.

Roles of the Wedding Ceremony and its Components

The wedding ceremony is fundamentally a rite of passage to formalize the marriage between two persons. However, the wedding ceremony has developed into a performance that often reflects “identities, cultural values, social norms, and needs” according to Rosenberg-Friedman (2012). Accordingly, the various components that comprise a wedding express the very function of those components. Whether it is reflecting traditional values or displaying standards and status, the wedding is the pinnacle moment that is the culmination of a couple’s values, beliefs, and understandings of the marriage covenant. This means understanding the varying components of a wedding leads to a comprehensive outlook on societal, cultural, and individual values.

In a qualitative study of African American weddings, Karen Dunak (2009) conveys the various functions and roles the wedding may play for the couple and society at large. African American weddings are known to be characteristically ceremonial while adhering to unique trends established by the couple. In African American notions of wedding, self-representation is an essential function of the wedding ceremony as Dunak discovers. The identification of the bride and groom into a culture is what characterizes the uniqueness incorporated into rather ceremonial wedding traditions. Social identity is signalled upon the various entities surrounding a wedding such as invitation of coworkers and peers, wedding party arrangement, and event venue selection. Dunak also points out that wedding venues have apparent values. From sentimental significance to aesthetic importance, venues are chosen carefully and functionally. One couple hosted their reception on a university campus, solidifying a sense of civic identity. Honor may signify a specific wedding venue, as in the case of getting married at the West Point Academy Chapel. This uniquely points to the

couple's decision to hold the wedding at such a prestigious location as a way to signify their status in this elite community. Additionally, the importance of a wedding can also be found in its role in the maturity and development of an individual. This start of maturation from singlehood to marriage is characterized by the wedding itself as the officiant may outline responsibilities of the couple. Additionally, the public nature of the wedding signifies the need for the community at large to perceive this transition for the couple.

The wedding is then an establishment of identity which has influences rooted in identity as well. This often means couples utilize the wedding as an avenue to make known their status and honor while expressing their identity through the elements of their wedding. Whether it is through the extravagance of the ceremony, elegance of the service, or the grandeur of the venue, the elements of the wedding are uniquely chosen to proclaim a much greater message of status.

Music can play as an integral component of a wedding, as in the case of Setswana, South African wedding celebrations. Though the music is fundamentally for its entertainment purposes, they can express ideas about marriage and love. More specifically, Nhlekisana (2007) examined wedding celebrations in Botswana and saw how music within the wedding culture can teach and comment on critical issues, roles in society, etc. Nhlekisana saw that these songs assumed the role of socializing the bride and groom for their new roles during the Botswana wedding celebration. This unique understanding that songs can express ideas of the couple's future is evident across cultures as well. Wedding songs often exhibit meanings of love and married life in the western world as well. Additionally, it was addressed that the changes are evident in the spirit of a wedding in Setswana weddings as the communal aspects are disappearing, familial contributions are being minimized, and traditional principles are

being forgotten. This change of wedding influence is important to note in understanding wedding cultures across the world.

Capturing the wedding is another significant element of the wedding that can influence the progress of the wedding and understanding of what is important. Modern technology has drastically influenced the wedding cultures of societies across the world.

Wedding photographs have an immense functional role in modern western weddings, as do engagement and bridal photographs. This intricate aspect of the wedding plays into the bigger “wedding industry” that includes the elaborate gowns, venues, decorations, etc. According to Lozada (2008), the presentation, angle, and elaboration of individual photographs reveal the perceptions of the big day and the capturing of perfection throughout the day.

The introduction of photography and videography has and will continue to influence the way in which weddings are structured. Not only is it important to look at how even just the presence of a videographer or photographer changes the wedding ceremony, but one must also take into consideration if the video captures the wedding on a holistic level. What was once an expected “indigenous” art tradition creating massive unshareable albums has now become outdated and replaced given the digital age we live in. Often, this notion of capturing the wedding impacts the wedding itself in its progress and timing.

Within Kerala, the importance of photographing the event can be seen in the simple fact that a photographer and videographer from both the bride and groom’s sides are hired to capture moments. Some Keralite weddings can have close to a dozen photographers and videographers. Janaki Abraham (2010) noticed that technology even intervenes the wedding,

for if it fails, the wedding waits. Moreover, photographs and videos have also been historically restricted to happy events depicting things people would want to remember.

Photography has impacted the wedding culture in most societies. The presence of photographers in the wedding has changed the experience of any wedding. The number of people photographing the event may restrict the way in which a guest experiences a ceremony. The intimate moments of the wedding ritual are captured, yet often at the cost of the guest's patience and time. Nevertheless, photography is functionally important for many brides and groom because of the value they place on the wedding itself. The reason they want to capture the wedding is because of the importance they place on what the wedding means for them.

Additionally, Dunak (2009) reveals the significance of the wedding dress as it plays its role in the wedding as well. Extravagance and elegance generally characterize the dress. Selecting the dress is a thrill and the day in which the brides wear them is the most important. The dress can reveal the woman's identification as a bride and unveil the epitome of her femininity. There lies political significance in the ceremony as well. The wedding takes on this role of legitimization into the greater community for the couple. Whether it's based on the nature of family, race, or citizenship, a wedding provides a site where the couple can assert their membership to a greater community.

Familial Significance in Weddings

These components of a wedding come together to produce an event and celebration that have many roles for society, for the couple, and for family and friends. Familial contributions to the wedding is considerable and unmatched.

Participation of family in wedding planning, wedding party, etc. signifies the importance of those familial connections. These varying roles carried out by family member signify their dedication to the couple. In Sniezek's (2005) qualitative study with southern Californian heterosexual couples, participants frequently noted the place of weddings in the ongoing family dynamics. Participants often referred to the wedding as a "family reunion" as well as a platform to organize and regulate the institution of family. While many couples already live independent from their parents prior to marriage, the wedding is a time to reconfigure the social bond between the partners and, for many couples, a wedding offers a means to obtain social recognition of their relationship from their parents according to Maillochon (2008).

Weddings within migratory family networks are significant in bringing together scattered kin to validate the bride and groom's relationship. The entire family dynamic is brought together from different contexts to display familial solidarity. The entity of family is remembered, celebrated, and grown through a wedding ceremony. Fog (2002) found that the wedding offers a site for a family reunion, but also a site to display of honor and respectability within the community.

Within the Keralite community, the selection of the bride/bride-groom, the authority of the parents, and influence of the community are still characteristic of the wedding reality, further validating the significance of the familial unit within the wedding, according to Thomas (2016).

American Wedding Traditions

Rituals Symbolizing Meaning

Weddings always develop around rituals and traditions. Selingson (1973) saw that even services not held at a religious institution adhere to many traditional observances. As components are added and taken away from the wedding ceremony, there is still an overall ritualistic model intertwined within the nuptial ceremony. The need for ritual persists as it provides consistency and a sense of culture that many couples crave. While the wedding ceremony can speak of family politics and cultural implications, there are also several rituals that cross culture. The oldest and most universal symbol of marriage is still the ring. The ring even dating back to the Romans and Greeks as evidence of rings has been found in Egyptian tombs. The ring has symbolized an unbreakable bond, trust and power. The ring being worn on the left hand shows that as the right hand is more dominant, for most, then the left hand is a symbol of submission and obedience to their partner. As the fourth finger has an artery that leads straight to the heart, it has become the place in which we find the wedding ring still today. Along with the seal that comes with the circular ring, the kiss was seen as an affirmation to the wedding vows. Another ritualistic element to the wedding is common wedding attire. The bridal veil has been symbolic across cultures. According to Lacey (1969), the veil has held importance in Christian, Jewish, Muslim and Hindu weddings, ranging from seen as protecting against spirits to wrapping up the bride's purity as a gift to remaining a white veil to symbolize virtue. The virtuous image of the bride is only strengthened in the color of the wedding dress, as the white wedding dress represents virginity and honor for uniting families. As stated by Chesser (1980), couples must "consciously and mutually [select] rituals with specific symbolism in mind [requiring] open

and honest communication”. These ancient rituals uniquely settle the human desire to have one’s status progression validated.

The Tension Between Ritual and Retail

Like any industry that requires goods and services, the wedding industry has become to be seen as a big business in America, particularly in the South. The dress, the veil, the flowers, the rings, the ceremony venue, and the hotel to host traveling families, are all small components of the wedding that compile a much larger industry. The prevalence of the \$70 million industry is evidenced through the existence of television shows highlighting the wedding from the dress process to the choosing of the cake (Kennedy, 2008) . There is even a competitive game involving ranking different wedding elements from attended weddings. Weddings have always been persisted with an evident struggle between ritual and retail, but it wasn’t until the time between the 1920s and the 1960s that the industry was majorly affected by marketing tactics from businesses. Consumer capitalism left little untouched in the 1920s. Howard (2006) reveals that newspapers, magazines and any other wedding related consumption feeds the “seemingly endless appetite for weddings in popular culture”, producing wedding themed movies, books, and toys captivating girls from a young age. There was a desire to identify the development of a consumer culture in order to manufacture desires and traditions. The twentieth century progressed and not only were older customs being exaggerated, but new invented traditions were pushing the market to grow even more. Consumption naturalized the lavish formal white wedding that wasn’t challenged until the turn of the 20th century. According to Howard’s research (2006) there was somehow a “trade on tradition” in order to comply with the new industry nature of more is better. Cultural critics began criticizing the over the top nuptials as couples were spending more than they

could afford just to meet the commercialized vision. In Howard's (2006) study published in *Brides, Inc.* entrepreneurs and various industries help create the domination wedding culture in the United States and contributed to the consumer capitalism that altered "one of life's most significant, intimate moments".

Historical South: The Bible Belt

The weddings within my [Katie] reach for observational and questionnaire styled research were held in one of two places: South Carolina or Georgia. It's important to note the historical climate and current state of the American southeast to explore the findings and its scope and significance. The culture in the American Southeast has continually been rooted in religion and family traditions, seen in cultural traits associated with the South. Within the late 1700s, regions below Virginia were experiencing religious growth now known as the evangelistic movement. The origin of the Great Revival is complex and is more than what Boles described as the thinly settled pioneer families addressing their loneliness. By 1787, three denominations, being Methodist, Presbyterian and Baptist, had formed their personalities and organizations shaping the future of the American South, with evidence still seen in today's religion practices studied by Boles (1996). What unified the three denominations of differing organizational structures and theologies was the understanding they held of what made men and women truly religious in the early American South, Heyman (2006) concluding that the connection being repentance and rebirth. Both South Carolina and Georgia find themselves in the "Bible Belt" of America. The region within the Bible Belt is an area characterized by strong evangelical Christians and a high church attendance. Along with religion, the family plays a much larger role in the south. The term family has been one of debate over the last few centuries as the image of a dad and mom and

2.5 children with a dog and a white picket fence has faded away. Mintz (1988) finding that the American family has undergone a revolution as “relations within the family [are] not be based on patriarchal authority but on affection and mutual interest”. Whether influenced by family traditions or religious ties, the Southern American wedding is characterized by many of the same things that it has been known for over the past several decades.

Keralite Indian Wedding Tradition

Love Marriage vs Arranged Marriage

A common characterization of Keralite weddings, and Indian weddings as well, is the concept of whether the marriage was a love marriage or an arranged marriage. A love marriage generally entails a marriage where the bride and groom “fell in love” prior to any familial influence and decided to get married. On the other hand, arranged marriages usually entail the family choosing a potential groom for a woman, or vice versa. Arranged marriages are then inevitably planned and directed by familial decisions.

Arranged marriage within South Asian contexts, generally can be explained by an elder relative match-making and finding a “suitable” spouse to marry into their family. In South Asian ideologies, finding a suitable spouse involves characterizing the potential spouse with their education, career, and possibly even caste. Kurian (2016) found that parents and close relative make inquiries about the potential spouse, their family, etc and make “an objective appraisal of the qualities of the young man and woman”. When a potential match or proposal is found, Aguiar (2013) found that in Kerala tradition, a “bride-viewing” takes place, where the man’s family comes to the woman’s house to have tea, in order to see her and speak to the potential bride. However, in an article in *India Today* by Kakar (2007), psychologist Sudhir Kakar found it important to note that even in arranged

marriages, there is a variety in how the marriages take place. In some instances, the bride and groom may not see each other until the wedding day because the family has decided on the betrothal. In other cases, the bride and groom will validate their acceptance of their families' choice and choose to get to know the future spouse prior to the wedding. The ultimate premise of an arranged marriage according to Aguiar (2013) generally entails finding a spouse from a similar socio-economic class and whose family is compatible with the other spouse's family.

Kurian (2016) states that arranged marriage is still the norm in Kerala and self-choice in marriage, or love marriage, does not often have the same meaning than in the Western society. Dating often just entails informal meeting with the other person in family, college, or work settings. In fact, dating individuals often in large cities are the only ones who perceive dating as the Western society does. Nonetheless, trends are changing but it is hard to quantify such transitions. Kurian (2016) understood these trends to be evident from a study conducted to understand the structure of the family within Kerala. As found in Vanitha's research (2009) most Indian families tend to be suspicious of and resist love marriages of all kinds — not just cross-caste, cross-class, cross-religion, or international marriages but even eminently "suitable" marriages that they themselves might have arranged.

It is important to note that arranged marriage does not necessarily mean the son or daughter must get married to the first potential spouse their parents present them with. In fact, oftentimes, the son or daughter may see multiple proposals before deciding. Kurian's studies in 2016 show that the increasing trend is that most Keralite parents give free choice to their child in making the final decision about a proposal. They will not push a marriage on

the child that refuses it, alluding to an increase in freedom in marital state and decisions regarding when to get married.

With Westernization, the notions of arranged marriages amongst Indians are becoming considerably diverse. Couples who have been arranged for marriage are often “dating” before their wedding to ensure the relationship is compatible. Arranged marriages are initiated in different avenues as technology and social media pervade the common culture. For instance, online marriage databases are common within Keralite culture. There are specific online websites geared to matching Keralite brides and grooms. Nevertheless, the parents still coordinate the online profiles, in a sense that the notion of arranging the marriage is still pervasive. Apart from arranged marriages, westernization has influenced the number of love marriages as well. More and more young-adult Indians identify arranged marriage as unsuitable for their new modern lifestyles, and hence, opt to find their potential spouse on their own. Nevertheless, within the Keralite culture, the stigma of love marriage remains, according to Kurian (2016).

Dowry

When understanding arranged marriages within Kerala, an important component of the wedding that often arises is the dowry. The dowry system, or *streedhanam*, meaning “share”, has long permeated the Syrian Christian culture of Kerala. *Streedhanam* is the gift from the bride’s family that is given to the groom and his family. It often entails the bride’s portion of inheritance given to her at the time of her wedding and more to ensure that she is taken care of in her conjugal household. David and Mahesawari (2016) found that though the official system of dowry was abolished by legislature in the mid-1950’s, the system is still practiced in varying forms.

Rastogi and Therly's study (2006) showed that while seen as a positive gain for the groom's family, the dowry system can have serious implications tied with the female feeling as though she is also property, falling victim to violence and discrimination. The agreements made in the dowry process can make or break many arranged marriages and has to be settled before the ceremony can take place. In medieval times, the dowry was given to the bride's father, as compensation for the loss of the labor of his daughter. Highlighted in Rastogi and Therly's research (2006) the practice has shifted from the bride's gift to now the groom feeling as though he is taking on financial burdens of the bride and the dowry is entitled to him.

Syrian Community within Kerala

Tradition has it that St. Thomas the apostle traveled to Kerala as part of mission of proselytization mid-first century AD. He brought a new teaching to a land filled with Hindu beliefs and traditions. Though Thomas was eventually martyred, his legacy lived on with many of the people of Kerala who converted as they practiced and propagated his Christian teachings. The Christian community of Kerala was later strengthened as Persians moved to Kerala in the 4th century. This unique history points to the unique, yet prominent Christian background of Kerala. Almost 20% of Keralites are Christians, while only 2% of the nation is. This points to the impact proselytization had on Kerala. These Christians in Kerala regard themselves as being Syrian Christians due to their historical and liturgical connection to Syriac Christianity. Palackal (2004) found within this community, unique characteristics and features developed as the community grew and local customs blended with Syrian influences, especially within its wedding practices.

Within the Kerala community, characteristics of the wedding reality are very unique and tradition-based according to Thomas (2016). The tying of the *thali*, or *minnu*, is still an important part of the marriage ceremony within the Syro-Christian wedding. The ceremony is culminated as the priest brings the necklace, or *minnu*, around the bride's neck and the groom ties it. During this tying of the *minnu*, a woman from the bride's family will often hold the hair and veil for the bride, as a symbol of family support in the marriage. Following the tying, a saree, or *manthrakodi*, gifted to the bride from the groom's family, is prayed over by the priest and then handed to the groom to veil her bride with. Often, a thread from the *manthrakodi* is used to tie the *minnu*. Dowry within the Syro-Christian community is a common practice and is referred to as *stridhanam*, meaning "share" as Thomas (2016) has researched.

The wedding incorporates all of these rituals and traditions to establish a fundamental understanding of the culture and to present a sense of transitional constancy for the couple. Even though understanding American and Keralite wedding traditions were essential in constructing the interplay within the wedding cultures, it was also noted that weddings are more than just traditions. Sneizek (2005) found that the intricacies of the wedding could not be contained in simple traditions. The roles of weddings as sites of social interactions, the beginning of new relationships, and more stipulate the necessary understanding that weddings are a multi-faceted dialogue. Perception of weddings with all of its roles it can play help to identify the depth of impact weddings can have.

Research Design and Context

Introduction

This was a qualitative study done over the course of 5 months, including anecdotal conversations, observations, and questionnaires. The wedding culture explored was specific to South Carolina and Georgia due to restrictions on our reach, both allowing a look into the American South. The Indian wedding culture explored were specific to the Keralite community, more specifically the Syrian-Christian community in Kerala. Anecdotal conversations were conducted with previous Indian brides over the phone, weddings were attended and observed in Kerala, India, weddings were observed and attended in South Carolina and Georgia, and questionnaires were sent to Southern American brides who were married within the last 40 years. Notes taken from these experiences were gathered, organized and analyzed to understand trends and interaction cross-culturally.

Positionality

Prior experience with attending weddings, seeing media depictions of weddings, and planning weddings inherently brought a level of expectation for what the wedding would entail. It is important to note that these expectations could lead to false assumptions while observing weddings and listening to wedding stories during our data collection. In acknowledging our positionality, we understand that our thoughts, expectations, and assumptions are prone to influence our understandings. Having attended multiple Indian weddings, specifically, Syro-Christian weddings, there is a general understanding of the flow of the wedding ceremony. Our positionality in the world as students of a university, members of college ministries, and friends with specific values all influenced how we set up this study and guided our observations. My [Juliet] family is originally from a Kerala, Syro-Christian

culture. This means my initial observation of Indian weddings comes mainly from attending Syro-Christian weddings of family and friends. The wedding culture of Syro-Christian Keralites are very unique, and accordingly, my past experiences with and current expectations of weddings formed around this specific culture. This meant that as I conducted conversations with past and present brides, I had varying expectations and predispositions while guiding my questions and responses. My partner [Katie] comes from a suburban city outside of Atlanta, GA. She grew up within the typical Southern American culture which molded her expectations and positionality on what a wedding is supposed to look like and accomplish. Having grown up in the southeast, her perception on weddings relied heavily on attendance to friends and family's weddings, as well as her experience having worked alongside a professional wedding planner in both South Carolina and Georgia. This behind the scenes access to weddings provided an interesting take on how weddings are operated as well as what couples are coming in requesting the most at their nuptials. Having grown up in a Southern Baptist Church, the morals and values placed upon marriage influenced her holistic view on marriage as well. However, in acknowledging our positionality, we found it important to deconstruct any preconceived perceptions of how the ceremony would take place in order to try to objectively see the wedding as a whole. We had to also be aware of the fact that our past experiences would inevitably influence how we perceived the wedding event and take that into consideration when formulating our conclusions and observations.

Additionally, we as researchers chose interviewees within our scope of reach. This meant that the American brides we interviewed and weddings we observed were primarily brides in Southern America. As two researchers raised in Southern America, most of our contacts we could reach for interviews were from Southern America. This meant our findings

and conclusions are limited in the scope of what American culture we are comparing our Indian wedding culture to. Additionally, Indian weddings we attended and Indian brides we interviewed were primarily within the Syro-Christian culture simply because my own identity within the Syro-Christian culture meant most of my family and friends were within this culture as well. Therefore, any conclusions, are restricted to understanding Southern American and Syro-Christian Kerala weddings due to our limited scope in contacts and those we chose to conduct conversations with.

Anecdotal Conversations

Three anecdotal conversations were set up with three Indian married women aging from 55-60. The first anecdotal conversation with Bride A was held over phone and questions regarding their engagement, wedding ceremony, and motivations were asked. Some questions were asked spontaneously according to the interviewee's response. It was ensured that the interviewee led the conversation how they saw fit, rather than the researchers probing for specific answers. In order to accomplish this, the conversation always started with "What was your wedding like". This allowed the interviewee to emphasize what they saw as the most important part of the wedding and guide the discussion on significance of the components of the wedding. Questions like how the components of the weddings were decided on, what were the motivations behind certain decisions, and the roles of others throughout the process were touched on to better understand the ultimate motivations of the wedding. The second anecdotal conversation with Bride B was held in person. The third anecdotal conversation with Bride C was conducted over the phone. Notes from these conversations were recorded in a journal as the conversation happened. After the conversation, we analyzed the conversation further to understand general tones and feelings

as they spoke about different aspects of their weddings. Notes from these anecdotal conversations were thoroughly recorded for further analysis upon obtaining all data.

Observational Research (Wedding Guest Perspective)

Two weddings were attended while in India for vacation during December 2017. The first wedding attended was of two Indians born and raised in India. We labeled the bride as Bride D. Observations during the entire wedding were recorded in a journal. Observations of everything from bridal party wear to the decorations, to the music, etc. Following the wedding, anecdotal conversation was held with Bride D to ask some more specific questions. Answers were recorded and analyzed. The second wedding was of two Indians who were born in India but had settled in Australia. They came back to their homeland to conduct their wedding ceremony. We labeled the bride as Bride E. Observations during the entire wedding were recorded in a journal. Following the wedding, anecdotal conversation was held with Bride E to ask some more specific questions. Answers were recorded and analyzed.

Observational Research (Wedding Planner Perspective)

When assisting couples with their big day, the wedding planner and team is in the midst of the decision making process revealing which cultural aspects and rituals are of importance to the bride and groom. Having the opportunity to continue my work under Jessica Rourke, a local South Carolina wedding planner, during the thesis process provided a great insight to the behind the scenes of each decisions as well as an observational aspect while working at the weddings themselves. Observations were made throughout the process, from the initial wedding inquiry sent out to the couples to their budget to the person with whom contacted us the most regarding the wedding to the execution of the wedding day. The position of worker at a wedding provides a more in depth analysis than attending a wedding

as a guest as I witnessed the lead up to the nuptials and was able to have conversations with my boss revealing the characteristics of each couple and their family. Observations were recorded and analyzed.

Interview and Questionnaire

In order to achieve a non-biased consensus of weddings held throughout the southeast, we created a general survey to send out to collect data. This survey was crafted in order to touch on the points in which we were looking to evaluate the differences in from culture to culture, including but not limited to the dress, family involvement, cost. The questions ranged from simple yes or no questions to open ended prompts that would lead to a discussion of a certain piece of their wedding experience. These surveys were then sent out via email to a list formed prior, compiled of brides from multiple generations and multiple economic backgrounds. Prior to sending out the surveys, we would ask those individuals for their participation in our thesis project. After receiving the go ahead from the participant that they would be willing to fill out our survey, we would email them the document in order to fill out with their answers and return via email. In the end, we had 6 participants respond. All surveys were analyzed upon retrieval, aiding in drawing collective conclusions.

Participant Demographic Overview:

<i>Bride Name</i>	<i>Identification in Paper</i>	<i>Citizenship/Heritage of Bride and Groom</i>	<i>Love/Arranged</i>	<i>Location</i>	<i>Religious Community</i>	<i>Ceremony Venue</i>	<i>Bride Age</i>
Renu	<i>Bride A</i>	American Indian marrying Indian	Arranged	Allapuzha, Kerala, India	Syrian-Christian	Orthodox Church	25
Anna	<i>Bride B</i>	Indian marrying Indian	Arranged	Allapuzha, Kerala, India	Syrian-Christian	Orthodox Church	25
Hima	<i>Bride C</i>	Indian marrying Indian	Arranged	Hyderabad, Andhra	Brahmin-Hindu	Community Hall	22

				Pradesh, India			
Angela	<i>Bride D</i>	Indian marrying Indian	Arranged with "dating"	Thiruvalla, Kerala, India	Syrian-Christian	Marthoma Church	24
Reshma	<i>Bride E</i>	Australian Indian marrying Australian Indian	Love	Thiruvalla, Kerala, India	Syrian-Christian	Orthodox Church	24
Jennifer	<i>Bride F</i>	Indian marrying Indian (brought up outside of Kerala)	Arranged with "dating"	Thiruvalla, Kerala, India	Syrian-Christian	Orthodox Church	26
Micaela	<i>Bride G</i>	American marrying American	Love	South Carolina	Christian-Baptist	Methodist Church	21
Courtney	<i>Bride H</i>	American marrying American	Love	Georgia	Christian- Non Denominational	Local Venue- Industrial	21
Shelby	<i>Bride I</i>	American marrying American	Love	South Carolina	Christian-Baptist	Local Farm-Outdoors	21
Mandy	<i>Bride J</i>	American marrying American	Love	South Carolina	Christian-Lutheran	Lutheran Church	26
Joy	<i>Bride K</i>	American marrying American	Love	Georgia	Christian-Baptist	Baptist Church	22
Melody	<i>Bride L</i>	American marrying American	Love	Georgia	Christian-Baptist	Baptist Church	25

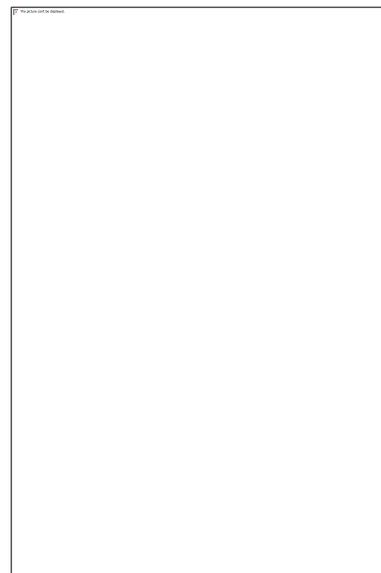
Interviewees, Questionnaire Respondents, and Wedding Planned Brides

Indian Bride Interviewees and Southern American Questionnaire Respondents

Brides A, B, and C were women who got married between 1985-1990. Bride A was an Indian American at the time of marriage who married an Indian living in India through an arranged marriage. The couple was involved with the Indian Syrian Orthodox church. Bride B was an Indian from India who married another Indian who lived in Saudi Arabia at the time. This couple was also a part of the Indian Syrian Orthodox Church. Bride C was an Indian who married an Indian, both from India. Bride C and her groom were Hindus, specifically from the Brahmin class. Brides A, B, and C were all a part of an arranged marriage, where the family took the major decisions in finding the groom for the bride. Anecdotal conversations were conducted with these past brides in order to understand the

wedding culture during their time. Brides D, E, and F were those who got married between December 2017 - January 2018. We were able to attend these weddings to observe the wedding as well as conducting anecdotal conversations with the brides of these weddings. Bride D was an Indian, studying to be a doctor, finishing up her residency, who got married to an Indian, through a partly arranged and partly love marriage. Bride D and her groom were a part of the Indian Syrian Orthodox Church. Bride E was an Indian Australian who got married to an Indian Australian. They were both settled in Australia where they fell in love. Bride E and her groom chose to have their wedding in India, even though they were both from Australia as a way of linking back to their homeland. They were both a part of the Indian Syrian Orthodox church even in Australia. Bride F was an Indian who got married to an Indian through an arranged marriage. Bride F and her groom were a part of the Indian Syrian Orthodox church as well. Bride F is currently studying for her physiotherapy degree.

Brides G-L consisted of the Southern American brides we were able to survey. From this list, Bride G, H, and I were all 21 when they tied the knot. Bride K was only a year older being 22 when walking down the aisle. The weddings of Bride G, H, I, and K were held in the South East, three out of the four of them being in the Church. Brides G, H and K married men that were of similar age, 21-22, while Bride I's groom was six years older. Bride L and Bride J were between the ages of 25 and 26 at their wedding and marrying men that were around the age of 30. Bride J got married in 2003 and Bride L got married in 1989. All



Brides that participated in our survey would identify themselves as Christians marrying other Christians, while the denomination from wedding to wedding is not identical. Out of the 6 Brides that participated, I was able to attend 5 of the bride's weddings, aiding in receiving a holistic view of the wedding from the bride's perspective as well as a guests.

Weddings via the Perspective of the Planner

From the weddings that I was able to attend as staff for the event, I was able to compile some generalizations and observations from each wedding. Wedding A's ceremony was held in the local Greek Orthodox Church with a reception to follow in the Columbia Alumni Center. The wedding was at once going to be held in Greece, but the importance of being able to invite the majority of the couple's families limited them to having a ceremony in the States. The budget for this wedding was the highest I had ever worked with coming in at \$97,000. The extravagant floral arrangements and wine being refilled on tables like it was

water were just some of the small details that showcased a lack of concern on spending too much. Wedding B took place at a local church and then a local wedding venue. The characteristics that stood out from the nuptials was the age difference between the bride and groom, as this was the groom's second wedding and his new bride was 15 years his junior. Another interesting occurrence was that the couple did not have a grand exit nor a send off, they simply just left, leaving the reception still going on with their friends and family still on the dance floor. Wedding C was held at a renovated bank in Downtown Columbia, SC. The couple was young, between 25 and 27, but the average age of the guests appeared much older. The overall theme was classic elegance with a twist, including plaid table linens on top of the classic ivory table clothes. The guests attire was the nicest I have ever seen in the past two years of working weddings in Columbia, SC, leaving me feeling underdressed.

Discussion and Findings

Individualized Traditions of Weddings pointing to Changes in Wedding Intimacy

Couple-Centered Wedding Services

Many of the Indian weddings we attended revealed the preference for a traditional wedding service to conform to cultural history and familial preferences but also to individualize the wedding service to be more than the typical church service, as was the case of most of the couple's parents' weddings. Weddings often had a more couple-centered service, emphasizing the couple's relationship and their desire to get married. For instance, in Bride D's wedding, the priest incorporated the couple's story into the orthodox service, which was uncommon prior.



The figure above captures the traditional praying over the necklace to be worn by the bride. This tradition was not abandoned, yet the service's tone was molded to be a more intimate version of these traditions.

Moreover, during the reception, the backdrop for the wedding was a slideshow of photographs of the couple. Additionally, Bride E incorporated her cousins singing into the service to add a more personal touch to the otherwise, generic orthodox service. Moreover, Bride E had a close friend be the MC for the wedding, which evidently gave a more personal touch to the reception.

After the wedding, anecdotal conversations conducted with the brides revealed more of this trend of personalization. Bride E stated she wanted the wedding to portray her relationship with the groom as most of the guests had not met them as a couple prior to the wedding. She also commented on the tendency of Indian weddings to be generic and “just

another church service”. Having been raised in Australia and seen weddings there, she understood that she wanted a more intimate wedding ceremony.

Unlike these modern weddings attended, brides who got married in the 1980s and 1990s had a completely different outlook on their wedding service. A few of the anecdotal conversations we had with previous brides aging from 50-60, pointed to this trend that their wedding was a very casual, and somewhat distant event. Bride B mentioned that her wedding ceremony was like every other wedding ceremony that was conducted in the church. She noted that she did not have to do anything in terms of organizing the wedding service because it was a well-established event that every couple went through. In the service, Bride B emphasized how the only part where the service can be understood to be a wedding service is near the end, when the priest prays over the bride and groom with the ring, necklace (*minn*), and the saree (*manthrakodi*). Apart from these specific prayers, the service is a very generalized church service in which its main goal is to come together to worship God and a family. Bride C recalled her wedding service as being the exact same as any Hindu service would have been on a day at the temple. The only difference was the walk through of the tying of the knot and walking around the fire. This portion of the wedding was the only aspect that reminded her that it was her wedding service.

Analyzing the importance of tradition in Southern American weddings, participants were asked if they saw this importance of keeping a traditional wedding. The majority of survey participants responded no. While some included the tradition of being walked down the aisle by their father, or reading the traditional “to have and to hold” vows, the aspect the couples wanted to place importance on was displaying their personalities, not keeping in line with what tradition looked like. Bride G revealed that her goal was to “make the day fun and

display [their] personality”. Having interviewed Bride G and attended her wedding, it was evident that the couple’s personality was highlighted throughout the ceremony. This could be attributed to the minister intimately knowing the couple and their relationship as it grew. Throughout the ceremony, he integrated the couple’s love story and anecdotes of his personal interactions with them, creating a more personalized and relational wedding service for the couple and their guests. Weddings may be scaling back on some extravagant features and emphasizing more intimate hallmarks to highlight the couple’s relationship and personality more than to display the couple’s wealth, as had been common. Moreover we saw that within the wedding ceremony, there has been an increased focus of personalizing vows as well. Reciting vows have shown to be a way in which couples can spend a few minutes in front of their friends and family to intimately talk. Bride I and her husband chose to read song lyrics to their first dance song as a part of their vows to their significant other, similarly pointing to desire to personalize the wedding service. Most Southern American weddings attended also opted to carry out the “first look”, where the groom is able to see his bride

before the service in her dress, rather than the groom's first view of the bride being her

walking down the aisle. This notion of first

look seemed to isolate the couple and their relationship so as to emphasize their relationship over the wedding guests.

Moreover, Bride G, H, and I choose to spend few extra moments with their respective partners alone, appreciating the day and their

relationship together before they experienced the ceremony and reception alongside their friends and family.

These findings point to couple-centered services those in the Keralite Indian and Southern American community are choosing to have. Syro-Christian Weddings seem to have transitioned from a simple traditional service that is often not couple-centered to a more integrated service, emphasizing the couple's relationship, over time, similar to modern Southern American weddings.

Reception Activities offer

Intimate Interaction

Weddings activities carried out during the receptions attended in India point to the desire for the couple to more intimately interact with guests.

Bride E chose to have typical

Westernized "wedding games", such as the bride and groom shoe game. She saw the idea in

weddings she attended in Australia where she lived and chose to include the game in her game to have a more intimate and “get-the-guests-to-know-you” setting. Questions like who’s the more emotionally invested one and who’s the big spender allowed the wedding guests to get to know the bride and groom and their relationship a little bit more. However, this game was uncommon amongst typical Keralite weddings. In fact, games like these in general were uncommon to play during weddings. Typically, Keralite wedding receptions consisted of simply introducing the bride and groom, eating, and photographing at the end. Bride E’s exposure to westernized conception of having wedding games to entertain the guests caused her to have a desire to do the same even though her wedding was in India. Bride E also saw the inclusion of games and activities as a way for her guests to know more about her and her groom, especially since the majority of guests would not know much about them as they were raised in Australia for most of their lives. Bride D’s reception attempted to emphasize the personable component of the wedding by introducing the newly wed and their families at a more intimate level at the beginning. Unlike typical weddings with very generic introductions to family, the MC, or master of ceremonies, who was the bride’s uncle, he introduced each of the immediate family’s name along with some intimate information about them. For instance, when the bride’s uncle introduced the bride’s brother, he laid out his educational history as well as his career aspirations. His introductions for everyone expressed very fairly characteristic facts about them. Uniquely, the MC also mentioned guests who had traveled from afar to attend the wedding by name. These simple introductions initiated a more intimate setting for the reception from the beginning. Additionally, the stage backdrop for Bride D’s reception was a video of the couple taking pictures and interacting. This enhanced the guest’s understanding of the couple as a conjugal unit. It is important to link

this understanding to literature review of notions of arranged and love marriages. Keralite brides of today decide on much of the course of arranged marriages as in whether they desire to “date” the arranged spouse prior to the wedding or not. This probably can be linked to desire of brides to establish more individualized traditions within their weddings to explore this established relationship more so that 30 years ago when the bride accepted the proposal and the wedding planning was already underway. These more intimate reception and ceremony components are not subject to only Keralite weddings, as the shift can also be seen in weddings held here in the Southeast. Bride I and her husband chose to read song lyrics to their first dance song as a part of their vows as a more personal, intimate reminder of what the couple truly valued in their marriage. Bride G incorporated speeches into her reception from members of the bridal party, giving a small view into the newlyweds relationships with friends and family.

With more intimate moments between the bride and groom and a more personalized approach to performing a wedding ceremony, the wedding is looking to become more individualized and less a carbon-copy of weddings as of years past.

Evolution in the Roles and Desires of the Bride

Taking on More Responsibility

It was evident that Indian and Southern American brides were taking on more responsibility and making more decisions regarding their wedding today than ever before. The brides from India interviewed who got married between 1985-1990, almost unanimously stated that most of their wedding was planned without them. Bride C mentioned how she had no part in wedding planning, so much so that she did not even have an idea what the temple nor the reception hall would look like the day of her wedding. However, she did not need to

know either. She wasn't too worried about the day being perfect because no one really worried about that. The wedding just happened for her older sister and she understood that the wedding would just come together for her as well. The family planned most of the wedding and the temple would decorate as had been done for previous brides. Brides A and B were similarly apathetic to the wedding planning because it was mostly the family who took on all of responsibilities of having a wedding. On the other hand, we saw modern brides taking on more and more responsibility to experience the most individualized wedding experience. Bride E, from Australia, planned her entire wedding in India through multiple Skype calls and online orders. Bride E looked for months for her bridesmaids dresses and wedding dress to perfectly match what she wanted. She had her picture perfect wedding in her mind and she knew she was the only one who could make her perfect picture become a reality. Bride D, though she was busy with her medical residency, chose to give her input to all of the decisions that surrounded the wedding. She knew she wanted a elbow-length wedding gown instead of a wedding saree for the wedding service. Bride D knew she wanted gray bridesmaid dresses. She knew she wanted groomsmen to wear suspenders. She mentioned how she followed popular Indian bridal pages and looked at pictures of her friends weddings to make her wedding a culmination of the best things she liked, pointing to the persistent trend of assuming more responsibility during the wedding.

Similarly, it was seen that brides getting married in Southeast America in today's culture were more willing and more passionate about taking the decisions for their wedding into their own hands. Bride G, who got married in 2017, stated that even though her family's input was important, she wanted all of the decisions to be ultimately between herself and her future husband. Bride G wanted to ensure that her and her fiance were the ones guiding the

course of the wedding decisions. Bride I, who got married in 2017 as well, expressed that while both her and her husband were family oriented people, they maintained their autonomy within making wedding decisions. For instance, Bride I and her groom insisted on a dessert only reception instead of a full course dinner, as suggested by their families.

From observational research within the past three years of working within the wedding industry, it was observed that there has been a higher number of brides and grooms meeting with the wedding planner instead of the bride and mother, which had been seen as the norm. There was an importance placed on representing the couple more so than what the families would want. This could be seen through the brides directly corresponding with the wedding planner and vendors rather than allowing the mother to take care of all the details, leaving the bride and groom to simply show up on the day of the wedding. From the wedding planner's perspective, Southern American couples are becoming more vocal about what they desire and do not desire, instead of allowing tradition guide the course.

Choosing when to Get Married

According to Goldscheider (1986), race, gender, demographic and family background have been, and continue to be, linked to the marital timing. In Kerala, specifically, the age of marriage in women have been higher than the rest of India. This can be attributed to the significance placed on female education, work participation, and other cultural factors as looked at in a study done by Gulati(1976). This notion of Kerala women marrying older than those in Southern American proved evident as we conducted conversations with the Indian brides. Bride B, who got married in 1988, studied nursing and told her parents she did not want to get married until after her studies were finished. In fact, she got married only after she had graduated with her degree and had been working for 2 years. Additionally,

Bride D chose to get married during her second year of residency of her medical career because she wanted to finish her degree and work for a little before getting married. She said her marriage life would be affected if she chose to get married as she was getting her MD. Accordingly, she waited until she had her degree and was settled in working at the hospital to get married. Bride E and her groom mutually decided on when they would get married. One of the factors that played a role in establishing their wedding date was graduation, again highlighting that education plays a role in the timing of marriage. Bride E graduated with her masters 6 months prior to the wedding while her groom graduated a year and a half prior. Bride E also mentioned her desire to want to get married before graduation because they understood their mutual desire to be married early on and did not want to wait to be married. However, her hesitation came with the possibility of not being able to finish her studies if she got married prior to graduation.

Within the scope of American weddings observed and American brides interviewed, there was an overall shift of choosing to get married younger and earlier in life. The easiest measures of characteristics of the wedding culture involves numerical data, whether that be the total amount spent on a wedding or the number of guests invited. When analyzing the brides we surveyed as well as those in which we observed, one of the measurements we recorded and compared was the ages of the couples getting married, both the age of the groom as well as the age of the bride. Not only did the age of the bride reveal the involvement of their family, but it also often correlated with the bride's religion beliefs. It proved interesting looking at whether or not there is a greater tie to get married at a young age due to the religious believes to save themselves for their wedding night. The pressure of trying to stay true to Christian traditions may have been the root to why the average age of

the 6 surveyed brides was 22.67, taking into consideration that the participating brides came from a majority Christian, Southern upbringing. Looking broader from just the brides we questioned, the average age of brides getting married in South Carolina according to research by Lenz (2017) is 27.3, slightly above the highest ever national average of 27, increasing from 23 in 1990. While the average age of women getting married has increased over the past two decades, our research and observation does not support this, as those with whom we surveyed who got married over 10 years ago were older than those in which we have surveyed who got married within the last 2 years. The correlation between religion and the rush to get married is one in which has not been extensively studied or researched, and yet I [Katie] have observed a trend of couples getting married right out of college. The observations and results from Brides G, H, I, J, K, and L shows a trend towards younger marriages. However, it is important to note that this is not a representative sample of college age students. The scope of our respondents were limited to organizations we were involved in, specifically our college ministry, which provided the biggest source in finding brides to question. According to the National Marriage Project at the University of Virginia, what sets the women apart who are getting married younger despite the increasing national average is that they are religious. Wilcox (2014) found that women getting married younger have been viewed “[as] more religious and have a more domestic and child-centered orientation to their lives than their peers who are getting married later and have a different approach to family life and marriage.” Looking at the demographics of those in which we surveyed to understand the Southern American wedding industry, the young median age did not surprise us as they alluded to the importance placed on religious beliefs or preserving the religious heritage in their marriage with preserving purity until marriage. When asked if the wedding

industry will survive in each respective bride's culture, Bride K responded, "I would say that, yes, the traditional, Christianity-based, yet fun and southern wedding will survive" highlighting that even the bride's themselves can identify with a "Christianity-based" Southern wedding complex. Another bride, Bride J, even disclaimed that she "found inspiration for [her] wedding from [her] church booklet on wedding rules".

Persisting Wedding Truths

Weddings brings Stress but Ultimately Relief

Throughout the years, one thing that seems to remain constant is that the wedding, no matter how big or small, brings stress. Whether the stress falls on the family or the couple themselves may not always be the same from wedding to wedding, but the fact that there are details and complications that arise remains inevitable and foreseeable.

Throughout my [Katie] observational research as a wedding planner, I have seen brides range from remaining collected when informed of the dreary weather outside to others claiming to have a panic attack because they believe that the groom may just not show up. Despite all of the stresses surrounding the wedding, brides mutually understand that the wedding in the end is a relieving moment. When looking at the bigger picture of the preciousness of the day means to the couple, brides can see the ultimate relief it brings. Bride G reflected on what the the day felt like, "what stood out to me the most was that even under all the stress of making sure everything stayed on time and constantly checking that everything was how I planned it, I was never nervous to finally see Will". Bride E, from Australia, expressed her stress over shipping bridesmaid and family wedding attire to India through online shopping. Nonetheless, she exclaimed her happiness over the perfection in the outfits on the wedding day. Relief overwhelmed her as she recieved messages from her

family in India reporting that the outfits had arrived two weeks prior to the wedding. On the other hand, the ultimate stress of Bride F was the coordination of events during the reception after the wedding. She needed a new MC (Master of Ceremonies) for the reception at the last minute to announce and direct the flow of the reception. The stress of finding someone to take on this role overwhelmed her mind the day before the wedding. Nonetheless, Bride F also expressed her ultimate satisfaction in the cousin who assumed this role and made her reception an enjoyable and precious celebration.

Family Involvement permeates Wedding Decisions

No matter how unique and personalized a bride desires her wedding to be, brides understand the importance of family involvement. Bride E and her groom chose to have their wedding in India, though they were settled in Australia, so their wedding could be a meetingplace for both families. Even though most of the bride and groom's friends were in Australia, they understand that they wanted their family in India to see their commitment to each other. Some friends from Australia were able to come to the wedding in India, however, the bulk of the wedding guests were family, most of which the bride and groom had not seen for over 10 years. This time lapse was another reason they wanted to hold the wedding in India. They understood that their wedding would bring distant family together, who, otherwise, would never meet. Bride E also chose to have cousins play music, sing songs, and lead her entrance into the reception hall by holding candles. Inviting guests were a family affair in all Indian brides interacted with. Many of the brides' families visited the houses of relatives and friends to personally hand them wedding invitations in the months prior to the wedding. Bride E was not even in India, yet her uncle and his family visited multiple relative's houses to invite them to her wedding. In the weddings of Bride A, B, and C

inviting guests were a family affair as well. This has been supposedly a longstanding tradition of Kerala considering that brides of today are following the same inviting procedures as that of brides who got married in the late 1980's. A tradition rooted in the importance founded on familial involvement in the wedding. These Keralite brides all touched on the idea of identifying their relationship with their spouse to their family and community at large as a purpose in having the wedding ceremony. This adds to Dunak's (2009) literature understanding that the wedding offers a site where the public can perceive the transition for the couple.

While observing Southern American weddings as a wedding planner, the role of the mother in handling details, especially during the week of the wedding, was very evident. While working Wedding A, the trust between bride and parents revealed the relationship the intimate relationship they shared. As I [Katie] corresponded with the mother of the bride more than the bride herself the few weeks before the upcoming nuptials, the role the mother had in all the decisions leading up to the day of the ceremony was large. The mother of the bride did know what the bride wanted and was willing to speak on her behalf in order to relieve some of the stress from the bride herself, but more so the mother was intent on keeping with the Greek traditions within her family, like sending home individually wrapped almonds. The Greek influence from the bride's side of the family was a large contributing factor as to why the bride's parents handled a lot of the details of the wedding, as they were more immersed in cultural experiences and traditions.

All 6 of the American brides who participated in our questionnaire and interview answered the question "Was family involvement important while making decisions?" by stating that family was important to them and they desired their input. Interestingly, the

extent of how much the brides relied on their family's input correlated with the bride's distance from home. While Bride L stated that she was very close to her family and their involvement was crucial, being an hour away from home during the wedding planning process resulted in her making a lot of the decisions for the ceremony. So while the initial desire to have the family involved in the process of wedding planning is there, circumstances can alter the outcome of how much the couple's families are truly involved.

Cross Cultural Interactions and Contrasts

These communities we explored the wedding culture within had intricate resemblances and dissimilarities between them, rooted in the understanding of inevitable modernization and maintained heritage. Outwardly, the weddings were widely divergent. Fashion, wedding progression, guest interactions were distinctive within each culture. Nevertheless, common threads of similarity were evident in familial influence, trends, and wedding intimacy.

A cross cultural contrast that was evident was the apparent retrogression to old traditions and rituals within the Southern American weddings while Keralite weddings exhibited more of a deviant form of traditions. Weddings observed and conversed over were all equally influenced by tradition in some fashion. However, an important point of divergence or the two communities rested in the emphasis. Southern American brides desired their weddings to resemble the "old-age traditions". The Southern brides we interacted with focused on keeping it simple, intimate, and rooted. This can be possibly to emphasize the marriage and its values it possessed in the older ages. Keralite weddings, on the other hand, exhibited grand, extravagant, and more "performative" elements. Singing, dancing, elaborate decor, extravagant clothing etc. characterized the modern Keralite weddings observed. This

can be linked to the ‘personalization’ trend of the weddings of today. The differing emphasis can still be foundationally understood to be a part of the performative aspect of the wedding, to present the couple’s relationship to their guests and celebrate the fulfillment of this transition.

Additionally, as already noted, the changes in the age of brides within the two communities have proven to be widely different. Within the Southern American wedding culture we explored, brides chose to get married as early as they could, often after their undergraduate years. Again, this can be foundationally traced back to the understanding that the pool of bride respondents were mainly from a college ministry group. The Southern American brides contacted who were married prior to this century, seemed to get married later than those who we contacted that got married recently. On the other hand, overall and intergenerationally, Keralite brides often placed their completion of schooling as a driving force in choosing when to get married. Therefore, it is important to understand that the intergenerational difference within the Southern American bride culture is not evident in Keralite bride culture. Keralite brides then and now desire to learn and work as much as possible prior to marriage. On the other hand, Southern American brides seem to have digressed from waiting longer to get married, despite their mothers getting married much

later, to identify with their partner as soon as they can.



Moreover, many cross cultural interactions were evident, especially the Western elements incorporated

into Indian weddings. Many of the bridal gowns and bridesmaid dresses of Indian weddings attended were indistinguishable than that of American weddings. The Indian wedding fashion that was once characterized by sarees and lehenga cholis have transformed into gowns and skirts. Additionally, the once non-existent notion of having bridesmaids and groomsmen within Kerala have permeated the wedding culture. Very few modern Keralite weddings lack bridesmaids and groomsmen. Whereas, thirty years ago, these concepts were foreign to the Keralite wedding culture. As seen in the figure, the bridesmaids are all arrayed in gray, sequined gowns, dissimilar to common Keralite Indian fashion. Similarly, the groomsmen wore red suspenders with bow ties, a fashion trend unprecedented in Keralite Indian fashion as depicted in the figure. When brides were asked about these fashion trends, they unanimously attributed modern Western styles and social media to their bridal party fashion preferences.

Conclusion

In this thesis, we looked at weddings across cultures to look at the trends of modern-day weddings to help explore the motivations behind the persistent wedding ceremony. We explored weddings within Southern America community and Kerala, India community and uniquely uncovered the trend of individualizing tradition of weddings, increasing the intimacy of the wedding in both communities. This adds to literature review by exploring the motivations behind the varying wedding elements. Modern brides desire to take on more responsibility to create the most



intimate performative exhibition of their relationship with the groom. The wedding is a performance but the role of the performance is to uniquely identify the couple's relationship in front of the audience. Identification that may require elaborate fashion, intimate games, innumerable photographs, etc. The desires of the family and the bride/groom may conflict but through these observations, it is partly evident that tension arises when the bride and groom's perception of what needs to be portrayed in the wedding is different that of the family's. The wedding is a unique site to display the couple, their relationship, and their status. Moreover, the ultimate relief that comes from the culmination of the wedding, that also caused the ultimate stress, is most likely because in the end, the performance was played and the relationship was validated. Our research adds to Rosenberg-Friedman's (2012) understanding that the wedding performance often reflects "identities, cultural values, social norms, and needs". One of those values is validation of the relationship by family and friends within the couples' circle. As in literature review by Dunak (2009), the public nature of the wedding signifies the need for the audience of this performance to perceive the couple's transition. Our research adds to this same understanding in that it can be seen that the need for personalization and intimacy in the modern wedding is fundamentally for the guests to perceive the couples' relationship. Findings similar to Chesser (1980), that the rituals that are maintained within the wedding ceremony may be altered, nevertheless, the desire for couple to validate their transition in status by others remains consistent.

Moreover, this notion that the wedding is characteristically ceremonial with unique trends in African American wedding culture was evident in that of Keralite weddings as well. There was a certain familiarity with the ceremonial service, yet unique trends of personalization permeated the service as seen in our research that supported that by

Nhlekisana (2007). Understanding the changes that have occurred in the wedding culture offers an avenue to discover the purpose of these changes. More specifically, these unique, yet personal “twists” to rituals and common ceremonial aspects allows us to understand that the couples desire to validate their relationship in a different, more intimate way. This parallels Fog’s (2002) and Chesser’s (1980) findings in their qualitative studies as well, the wedding as a site of validation.

It is also important to note that our expectations in our findings radically differed from our actual findings. Prior to analyzing our observations, we assumed that cross cultural contrasts and Westernization notions would permeate our discussion. Nevertheless, we found common trends and cross-culturally persistent truths to be more profound as we explored the answers of our participants. Westernizing trends were clearly evident in Keralite Indian weddings in aspects of fashion and bridal party, nevertheless, interactions between the Indian and American cultures were not a major point of discussion.

Limitations of this qualitative study include the lack of diversity in the pool of respondents. This was a major drawback within our study since our conclusions cannot be understood to be depictive of large populations. The communities we explored were rather specific, and therefore, our findings have a very limited scope of applicability. Most of the Southern American weddings attended and brides conversed with were often contacts we had within our college ministry, narrowing our observations to a specific pool of people. This meant our Southern American participants were often those who were marrying soon after graduating from college, leading to possible bias in understanding ages of modern brides. Additionally, mainly only two generations were explored. Those who got married from 1985-

1991 with brides who got married in between 2014-2018. Brides were our sole source of perspective as well. The conversations we had were often with brides, rather than grooms as well. Moreover, some of the participants were family members which may have influence conversations and the overall direction of topics discussed. Future research could direct attention to national trends in America and India as well as regional differences within those trends. Additionally, having more conversations and getting more questionnaire respondents could offer a more holistic view on the trends seen and explored. Religion is a very integrative aspect of the wedding culture, therefore, it would be interesting to explore trends across religions within the Southern American community as well as the Keralite community.

Overall, this qualitative study has limitations, nevertheless, offers valuable insight on the communities explored and the weddings analyzed. These insights add to the wide literature to develop foundational motivations that accompany the evolution in the desires of the bride and the intimacy of weddings. Moreover, ultimate stress and eventual relief that accompanies the weddings as well as the persisting truth of family involvement with wedding decisions develops these motivations furthermore. Motivations rooted in validating the couple's relationships to their family and friends. Ultimately, this study adds to the understanding that weddings offer a site of social validation of the couple and their relationship. The varying trends and elements of the wedding that may have changed still point to the deep desire of the couple to have their social community understand and accept their relationship.

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