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# Timeless Traditions

Why we do what we do when we say 'I do.'

BY VANESSA SALVIA

A newly married couple departs the church in a car bedecked with soup cans tied onto the bumper, horn blaring. A bridesmaid tosses petals on the ground in front of the bride. It's all tradition, with a capitol "T." But why? Where do these strange customs come from?

Many of the wedding traditions we take for granted today have rich histories going back thousands of years. Celebrating a wedding with noisemaking dates back to ancient China, where people believed exploding fire-

practice dates even further back. Kenyan couples crossed wooden sticks during their weddings to call upon the natural life force found in trees. African slaves brought the practice to this country.

Flower girls trace back to England. Brides strolled down paths strewn with flower petals to symbolize a smooth and easy experience during marriage.

If you're Greek, you might break a plate at your wedding. The origins of this are murky, but some folklorists believe it is a

with decorum. The delicate glass is wrapped in a towel and gently crushed underfoot. This is a poignant reminder of the fragility of life and isn't meant to be a destructive act.

Traditional marriages between two Hispanic/Latino people are typically performed as part of a full Catholic mass. One tradition modern couples frequently honor is the *arras*, recalling the Moorish tradition of paying the bride's family. Thirteen gold coins are placed in a small, decorative chest or box. The coins symbolize the

## *Celebrating a wedding with noisemaking dates back to ancient China, where people believed exploding fireworks repelled evil spirits.*

works repelled evil spirits. Many cultures embrace noisemaking to ward off demons. In the U.S., newlyweds honored those traditions, even if they couldn't light fireworks. The Western tradition of bell ringing comes from this Chinese idea, and explains why bells are a popular wedding motif.

The old adage "tying the knot" actually refers to the Celtic ritual of handfasting, where the couple's hands were literally tied together during the marriage rites. Modern brides follow the Victorian saying by wearing "Something old, something new, something borrowed, something blue." This tradition originated with the Israelites, whose brides carried something "old" from a family member and wore blue to symbolize faithfulness, purity and love.

Some modern African American couples jump over a ceremonial decorated broom. This emulates an African tradition of using a broom to sweep away evil spirits. But the

spontaneous expression of *kefi*, or "spirit of joy." Of course, sometimes plates get broken during violent or angry outbursts, so controlled plate-breaking may have been a way to impel evil spirits away from the wedding, tricking them into believing the occasion was not a joyous one.

Either way, plate-breaking is officially discouraged in Greece now due to the dangers of flying shards. Today Greek establishments catering to wedding parties must be licensed to allow the practice. In this country it's difficult to find a caterer or venue that permits it. If you adopt this practice, remember: It's plate-breaking, not plate-smashing. It is considered discourteous to pick up pieces of a broken plate to further break them, or to throw plates (even in jest) at a person or wall. The accepted way to break a plate is to hold it out and drop it to the floor. This rite is very similar to the Jewish practice of breaking a glass, which, again, is done

Twelve Apostles and the couple's union. The groom presents them to the bride one at a time.

Of course, you don't have to be born into a specific culture to admire its ceremonial traditions and incorporate them into your modern wedding. Sometimes the most memorable moments are when you adapt a meaningful tradition in a way that makes it personal for you. One couple I know who have visited Italy many times modified a traditional ancient Roman ceremony and spoke their vows in Latin, though they are not of Italian heritage.

One custom we probably won't be seeing in the modern wedding ceremony is the Slovakian tradition of the bride seizing a broom and spontaneously dancing a polka with it to symbolize her joy at assuming the role of housewife. Whatever tradition you incorporate, have fun making it meaningful and personal to you. ♥



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