African Influence

Couple incorporates fashions, fabrics and traditions of Africa into their Louisiana wedding

By KAREN MARTIN
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South Louisiana met West Africa when Sharon Jenkins Richardson and Tunde Mobolade Anima-shaun exchanged wedding vows.

Richardson, who lives here, and her attendants wore gowns with an African influence. The groom, a native of Lagos, Nigeria, wore a tuxedo.

Their mixing of cultures as part of their wedding celebration is a growing trend among couples, said Nana Ofosuh, who made the bride's gown and those of her six bridesmaids and 14 hostesses.

"It's becoming more and more popular," said Ofosuh, who owns Nana's Africana Fashions. "It's bringing them back to their roots, but with their own style."

Ofosuh said she will probably do African-style dresses for 10 weddings this year, compared to about four last year.

"And next year will be even more intensive," she said.

Like Richardson and Anima-shaun, some couples combine African and American traditions and fashions. Others, like Florestine Harris and Donald Turner, want a complete African look.

Harris and Turner will marry Sept. 23.

"We both wear African fashions often," said Harris, who with her fiancé wore clothes with an African influence to Richardson and Anima-Shaun's wedding.

"It symbolizes unity from the heart," said Turner. "It symbolizes life itself as a whole."

Their wedding attire is being tailored by Chandra LeBlanc, who designs under the name Shanti for her boutique, Timbuktu.

Richardson said she decided on the brightly colored fabric for her bridesmaids and hostesses to get a different look.

"I wanted something unique," said the 33-year-old bride, noting the union was a second marriage for both of them. "When I got married before, I had a big, traditional wedding. My fiancé insisted we have a big wedding this time, but I didn't want to do it a traditional way again."

Three of the bridesmaids wore gowns with fuchsia and metallic gold designs on a purple background. The other three wore gowns with purple, fuchsia and
metallic gold designs on a cream background.

The gowns featured what Ofosuh called a kaba top or butterfly sleeves, and each bridesmaid wore an African-style hat.

The hostess gowns were a “full butterfly style” with draping sleeves and a full-length skirt, and each wore an African kufi hat with a fan, Ofosuh said. Three different fabrics — all in teal, purple, black and metallic gold — were used for the hostess gowns.

Ofosuh also designed Richardson’s creamy off-white gown, which was made of a textured silk sprinkled with iridescent sequins. The gown featured a midcalf, straight skirt circled by a train that fell from the waist. She wore a turban instead of a veil.

“This is an African style because it is taken from our royal outfits. Our queens wore capes,” said Ofosuh, who is originally from West Ghana.

“The style has been adopted by Europeans.”

While Richardson favored an African look, Anima-shaun, 37, wanted an all-American style.

“He said he’s always worn African clothes and he was tired of wearing them,” Richardson said with a laugh.

“He wanted a tuxedo.”

The groom’s cream tuxedo jacket featured a black shawl collar and black pants, with a gold tie and cummerbund.

The decor of the Gloryland Baptist Church had an earthy feel, which Richardson said was in keeping with the African theme. Dried flowers, raffia, urns, baskets, banana trees, fruit and lots of greenery were used on the altar and to decorate the pews.

Richardson and Anima-shaun also incorporated the African-American wedding tradition of “jumping the broom” into their ceremony.

The custom was revived almost 20 years ago when Alex Haley’s “Roots” depicted the memorable moment when the betrothed couple, Kizzie and Chicken George, jumped over a broom, signifying their official union and beginning of home-making.

“It signifies that we’re jumping into a new life,” said Richardson, adding that their wedding, their new lives will draw from both their African and American heritages.