

THE BENEFITS OF BEING A 'WIFE'

By

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## The Benefits of Being a 'Wife'

Ireti stared out of her bedroom window lost in thought. Weddings in Nigeria, she mused, were not like weddings in England. African weddings involved not just the joining together of two individuals, but of two families. In Nigeria, this joining often took place over three ceremonies – the traditional Engagement or 'Gage', the religious event and the civil ceremony. A wedding could be a spectacular occasion when most members of the participating families felt obliged to grace the occasion with their presence and Ireti calculated that her extended family alone could field up to five hundred 'obliged' guests.

But she hated weddings - and so did Father. It was one of the few things they agreed on. All that fuss, not to talk of the extraordinary expense. Such occasions demanded the wearing of full traditional Yoruba clothes, many of which would be commissioned especially for the occasion. Ireti was often forgiven for wearing western dress on important occasions, as she couldn't be expected to fly from the UK with heavy traditional robes in her luggage - besides which, she might travel with clothes of the wrong colours. The Yoruba people of south-western Nigeria have a fathomless love for colours and textiles. For many, there is no such thing as 'clashing' colours, only what is 'cool' and fashionable. Well in advance of a wedding, key groups like the bride's closest friends or the groom's family, would club together to commission the design and weave of some material in the chosen colours.

Yards of this cloth would then be sold to participating friends or family members to use in creating their outfits.

The more cost conscious created their chosen designs and colours, in cotton prints and batiks. The more affluent went for *aso oke* – sometimes, made not of cotton as is traditional, but of silk or some other such exotic product. In Irete's view, such displays of wealth showed that there was too much money and not enough sense.

Those who couldn't afford enough cloth to have whole outfits tailored, could purchase small pieces to use as head ties or shawls. It would thus be easy to identify the bride's or groom's closest friends or family amongst the crowds at a wedding, from the matching colours of cloth they were partially or wholly dressed in.

The other problem with weddings, thought Irete, was that she didn't recognise many of her five hundred relatives. Father had fourteen siblings - same mother, same father. There were a phenomenal number of uncles, aunties, many degrees of cousins, in-laws and relatives of in-laws. An African extended family, Irete mused, was a thing of dubious wonder. It was a nuisance always having to pretend that she remembered this uncle, or that cousin's wife, or their children. If she ever got married, Irete had decided as a teenager, she would take Father's long-standing advice: 'Marry at the Registry and don't tell me until afterwards!'

This attitude began to change when Irete visited her childhood friend, Eunice. During lunch, Eunice kept glancing at her, and finally blurted out,

‘Ireti! We need a wife’.

‘Pardon?’ spluttered Ireti, her spoonful of yam pottage nearly going down the wrong way.

‘We need a WIFE! We haven’t got enough!’ Eunice declared as she pushed an eye from her smoked fish to the side of her plate.

‘Well, *you’re* a wife; won’t you do?’ Eunice had married an aspiring civil servant three years earlier, much to Ireti’s chagrin, for she was no longer the girl that Ireti knew and loved. She’d become so boringly responsible.

‘Yes, but we need *more* wives!’

‘WHY?’ Ireti could not hide the sarcastic tone in her voice.

‘Because Cousin Bayo is getting married and we haven’t got enough - which is where *you* come in’.

‘Me? Don’t be ridiculous! Just because cousin whatshisname wants a wife doesn’t mean that *I’m* gonna be it. No way!’ Ireti was quite shocked at Eunice’s sudden descent into match-making.

Eunice gave Ireti a peculiar look, as Ireti continued:

‘Why can’t he find his own wife? Why does he need help? Is he so useless? How dare you try and palm him off on me! *I* don’t need help in that department, thank you very much!’

This was true. Ireti had acquired plenty of experience in fobbing off hopeful young men – and some not so young ones, too. She tossed her head defiantly as - metaphorically speaking – she prepared to go toe-to-toe with Eunice. The excellence of the yam pottage notwithstanding, she was ready to

put her friend in her place. But Eunice merely laughed, attracting the attention of her mum.

Aunty Clara, strolled into the kitchen, exclaiming, ‘Ireti my dear, so nice to see you - and *hear* you! How *are* you?’

Before Ireti could compose herself and answer, Aunty Clara demanded of her daughter, ‘I take it you’ve asked her?’

‘Yes, I have, but I think she’s misunderstood’, Eunice giggled.

‘Misunderstood?’

Aunty Clara bustled over to the dining table and asked imploringly,

‘Ireti dear, wouldn’t you like to help us out at Cousin Bayo’s wedding? There aren’t enough daughters in our family to host the events properly, so we’re asking all the young women we know if they could help us out. You’re on holiday now, so you’d be perfect!’

Without drawing breath, Aunty Clara carried smoothly on:

‘Do you want me to speak to your father? It’d only be for a couple of days, for the Gage and the Church wedding. You could stay here! We’d be only too happy to put you up.’

When Ireti got home that evening, she found that Aunty Clara had already phoned her parents. Looking rather pained, Father asked, for the first time in her life, ‘What are you going to wear?’ Until now, he had never given two hoots about what she wore – as long it wasn’t too short or tight. She knew better than to bring her hipsters or favourite leather miniskirt home. During these holidays, her wardrobe was limited.

She replied, 'I've got a navy-blue skirt suit from Jaeger on Bond Street'. She thought that'd impress him, seeing as he was doubting her dress sense.

'It's got ... gold braid at the neck and sleeves ... and a big ..... white collar .....'. Her voice trailed off as she registered the look on Father's face.

'You can't wear that!' he exclaimed, 'You're going to a wedding, for goodness sake! And a Gage, too!'

It was only then, that Irete belatedly realised: this was not a party. It was a traditional occasion, and she was too late to take part in the design and sale of the groom's family's *aso oke*. She'd have to find her own.

So it was that Irete found herself taken firmly in hand by Mrs Idowu, a trusted family friend. Father handed her an unfeasibly large wad of cash. Irete was shocked. This was the father who expected her to submit a list of expenditure for the coming academic year – right down to how many toilet rolls she expected to buy - before he would write her a cheque to cover university fees and expenses. Irete shook her head at the injustice – and promised herself to inflate that list at the earliest opportunity.

Rather than go to the fabric markets of Tejuosho Market on the mainland, or Martins Street on Lagos Island, Mrs Idowu paid a taxi to take them deep into the heart of Iwaya, a tough, high density neighbourhood that Irete would never have dreamed of visiting for any reason. At a shabby three-story block of flats, they climbed the stairs to the top floor where they took off

their shoes before stepping into the large front room of someone's home.

Once Irete's vision had adjusted to coming indoors from the sunny street, she realised that this was no ordinary 'front room'. Stacked from floor to ceiling against every wall, there were bundles of brightly coloured fabric, every one of them being *aso oke*.

*Aso oke* is a thick cotton material locally woven on traditional, often narrow, looms. The resultant long strips are sewn together to form a wide cloth which is cut and sewn into outfits for men and women. The strips may vary as to colour and pattern, so when they are sewn together to make a bolt of cloth, the effect can be dazzling.

The best *aso oke* is hugely expensive and Irete knew immediately, that she was looking at some of the costliest fabric she would ever see in her whole life.

Although the various combinations of colours and patterns had meaning to those versed in it, Irete was ignorant of all that. She just stood rooted to one spot, mesmerised by the opulence, excited by the very idea of wearing something so precious. She could *smell* the luxury. This was her first chance – perhaps her last – to ever acquire such a high-value possession. Then she would henceforth be able to stand shoulder-to-shoulder with the Eunices and Aunty Claras of the world.

On a stool in the middle of the scrupulously clean floor, a woman trader sat wearing a *buba* (blouse), *iro* (wrapper) and *gele* (head tie) in *aso oke* woven in emerald green and bronze colours.

Mrs Idowu kicked off the proceedings by exchanging elaborate greetings with the trader. Then an energetic dialogue ensued in Yoruba that was so deep, Irete – whose grasp of her father-tongue was riddled with slang and Lagos-isms – stopped trying to follow and just silently drank in the colours surrounding her. After a good ten minutes, the trader finally rose.

She began to select bundles of cloth from the stacks around the room, draping the ends of each one in turn, across Irete's shoulders. Irete gazed at her reflection in a nearby mirror, admiring the beauty of each piece. The trader's activity gradually increased to such a speed that Irete couldn't think straight. Mrs Idowu had no such trouble. They must have looked at forty or fifty bundles, before she paused at a bottle-green and creamy-white cloth.

It suited Irete's skin colour.

'That's a nice one, don't you think?' Mrs Idowu asked.

'Hmmm,' Irete replied, turning to view the cloth from various angles in the mirror.

'It's nice', Irete said, 'but don't you think it looks a bit too much like the national flag?'

Mrs Idowu ignored her and proceeded to bargain furiously with the trader, and half the wad of cash changed hands.

But Irete had already seen one bundle of *aso oke* that she really, *really* liked. She just hadn't had the nerve to say so. Noticing that Mrs Idowu still had about half of Father's wad of cash left, Irete now leaned over and ever-so-casually – like she was just having a look - pulled a bundle of



creamy-white and burgundy *aso oke* out of the 'reject' pile.

Mrs Idowu frowned. 'Your father said you should buy ONE for your friend's wedding!'

'Yeeees. But there's enough money left to buy two; one for Lagos and one England,' lied Ireti, knowing full well that she wouldn't be leaving either behind when she returned to university.

'I don't think he intended for us to spend aaall this money', Mrs Idowu objected.

Ireti stood in front of the mirror and draped the cream and burgundy *aso oke* across herself in various ways. It was exquisite, and they all knew it. She looked at Mrs Idowu, and kept looking unblinkingly at her, as the minutes ticked by. The trader, recognising that there was still more profit to be had from this, joined in the demonstration of unyielding pester-power. She twirled Ireti slowly around, this way and that, showing off the material, adding quiet comments now and again, in her impenetrable Yoruba dialect.

Mrs Idowu caved in.

It took some bartering, but the trader dropped her price sufficient for the rest of Father's cash to cover the cost.

'Your Father's going to have to pay extra for the tailor', Mrs Idowu warned.

'Oh, don't worry', chirped Ireti, very pleased with herself. 'Feel free to blame me!'

Four weeks later, Ireti and Eunice were dressing for Cousin Bayo's

Gage in Aunt Clara's spare bedroom. Eunice and her mother wore identical Yoruba clothes in purple and cream *aso oke*, sewn of cloth commissioned for the wedding. Irete's burgundy and cream version was a pretty good match.

She practised before-hand, tying the large *iro* in front of Mother's full-length mirror, learning to ensure that the edges of the wrapper were straight. Like many other women, she had tied a soft cloth belt under the folds of the *iro*, to ensure that it would not come undone. She practised walking in it slowly - no marching about or running up the stairs in this! Sashaying was the most efficient and frankly, the most elegant, way of getting around.

Irete experimented endlessly with tying the *gele* until she developed her own style, where one end of the head tie fell elegantly behind her left ear.

And then there were the shoes, not to talk of the clutch bag. Oh, and some jewellery – she borrowed that from Mother. By the time Irete had finished preparing to be an invited 'wife', Father was seriously regretting his earlier largesse.

There was though, one question that only occurred to her once she was fully dressed and waiting for their transport on Aunt Clara's veranda.

Turning to Eunice, she whispered, 'How do you go to the loo?'

Oooo, Eunice laughed so much she had to go back upstairs and re-tie her *iro*.

In the streets around the bride's parental home, a traffic jam built up from all the wedding arrivals. Guests had to slowly walk the last fifty yards

in their finery. Passers-by stopped and stared, while Ireti concentrated on making sure she didn't fall over. The party of the groom, by now numbering at least seventy, gathered by the front door of the bride's home and burst into song. She didn't know the words, but Ireti swayed and clapped along enthusiastically, looking as if Eunice's Cousin Bayo was her own dear brother.

The doorbell was rung for quite a few minutes before it opened a crack. A middle-aged woman peered out and the groom's party greeted her uproariously as 'sister! cousin! in-law!', expecting to enter the house. But the woman, wearing an all-enveloping, faded green dressing gown, and looking like she'd just got out of bed, drew herself to her full height of four foot ten and hissed.

'Where have you been, for God's sake?'

Everyone fell silent; Ireti's breath caught in her throat as the woman raised her voice.

'Granny's ninetieth birthday was yesterday! We were expecting you to bring the cake!'

In a split second, Ireti's exuberance turned to dismay. All the fuss and bother, all for nothing. The embarrassment! The disgrace!

As she tried to take in what this meant for herself, for Eunice, Aunty Clara, even for Cousin Bayo whom she had not yet actually met, Ireti heard a ripple of laughter turning into a roar.

Oh ho! So, it was all an act! The woman at the door couldn't keep it

up any longer and smiling, removed her dressing gown to reveal a beautiful *iro* in blue and yellow.

As she entered the bride's home, Irete was surprised to catch herself thinking, 'Bring this wedding on!'

The End.