The best of both worlds

What if your wedding is combining two cultures as well as two lives?

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Bringing two families together can be one of the biggest challenges of getting married. Especially if those families come from two distinct ethnicities or religions.

The Jeffersons and the Changs. The Goldbergs and the O'Malleys. Even now, such unions are sometimes considered taboo. Families' clashing expectations can leave the bride and groom stuck in the middle, trying to balance respect for their families with their desire to live their own lives.

"At some point you're going to have a family member that isn't going to understand," says Travis-Lee Moore, wedding consultant for Wretched Excess Events. "You help with that the more you can work pieces of their culture into your ceremony."

Tanya Posavatz, founder of Clink Weddings, encourages clients to incorporate their backgrounds into their ceremonies in unexpected yet reverent ways, such as reading passages from Spanish literature, toasting with Greek wine or dining on Korean dishes. An African American bride can include the African broom-jumping tradition at the end of her ceremony or use African textiles and fabrics at the dinner table. A groom of Japanese descent can participate in a sake-sharing ceremony with both sets of parents.

"If it's really important to someone else in the family to have (a custom) included in your wedding, compromise should be the rule of the day," says Posavatz, who often acts as the objective third party between dueling family members. "At some point, the wedding day is just one day, but (couples) will live the rest of their lives with their families."

Austin's Khotan Shahbazi-Harmon, 36, and Wade Harmon, 39, consider themselves among the lucky couples who encountered little family friction at their wedding in July 2000. She was born in Iran, has both Arab and Jewish heritage and is a member of the Bahá'í faith. He's an Anglo-Saxon from Arkansas who converted to Bahá'í in 1983, shortly before meeting his bride-to-be. Khotan wasn't deterred by horror stories she'd heard about cross-cultural weddings.

"It has a lot to do with expectations," she says. "We were lucky because our parents didn't have any; they were just so happy about us being married."

Since his family learned so much about the couple's religion over the years, they were understanding. But to be inclusive, they presented the Harmons with all of the details of the ceremony beforehand and invited Wade's brother-in-law, a Southern Baptist deacon, to greet guests and Khotan's sister-in-law to officiate the proceedings.

Thirty-year-old Briana Mohan and her husband, Mohan Ambikaipaker, 31, were also committed to honoring both of their backgrounds — Catholic and Hindu. The couple met 11 years ago at Swarthmore College and were married last June in his home country, Malaysia, and again at Austin's Our Lady of Guadalupe Church in August. The Ceylon Tamil Hindu celebration (based on the beliefs of a Sri Lanka-based sect) was attended by 500 friends and family members, including distant relations. For the second ceremony, 150 of her loved ones, as well as the groom's parents, gathered for their convalidation (a Catholic ceremony that confirmed their previous vows). It took a lot of planning, money and travel, but their efforts were successful — two sets of happy parents and two happy newlyweds.

"We didn't want either family or community to feel slighted," explains the bride. "You'd be hard-pressed to find anyone who tells you their wedding was cheap. But even despite all the traveling, we really tried to keep them simple and affordable."

It's nice to know that some cross-cultural couples are met with acceptance. But for those who can't arrange for such smooth sailing, clinical psychologist Jan Ford Mustin recommends pre-marital counseling or lots of talking to anticipate potential problems. "That way they're not so emotionally blindsided."

As your wedding day approaches, deflect comments that might be taken personally and maintain a sense of humor about the entire situation. (Mustin: "The weird stories of today are the funny stories of tomorrow.") And don't shoot for perfection.

"Be flexible," she advises. "Don't make it mandatory for everybody to be at every function."

And when all else fails? Elope. "There are times when a private ceremony is called for. Culture blows weddings up into some *big* event, but a wedding doesn't take the place of peace of mind, a couple's happiness and a reasonable marriage."

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