

Origin

The significance of the broom to early African-Americans originates in the present-day West African country of Ghana. During the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade, most of Ghana in the 18th century was ruled by the Asante of Ashanti Confederacy. Asante urban areas and roads were kept conspicuously clean according to visiting British and Dutch traders with the use of domestically made brooms. These same brooms were used by wives or servants to clean the courtyards of palaces or homes. The broom in Asante and other Akan cultures also held spiritual value and symbolized sweeping away past wrongs or warding off evil spirits. This is where the broom comes into play regarding marriage. Brooms were waved over the heads of marrying couples to ward off spirits. The couple would often but not always jump over the broom at the end of the ceremony. Jumping over a broom as part of a wedding ceremony was also common in pre-Christian European cultures. The custom survived the introduction of Christianity and was practiced by both blacks and whites in the American South prior to the Civil War.



Symbolism

Jumping over the broom symbolized two things. The first was the wife's commitment or willingness to clean the courtyard of the new home she had joined. Furthermore, it expressed her overall commitment to the house. The second thing was the determination of who ran the household. Whoever jumped highest over the broom was the decision maker of the household (usually the man).

In America

The practice of jumping the broom was largely discarded in Ghana after the decline and eventual fall of the Ashanti Confederacy in 1897 and the imposition of British customs. The practice did however survive in the Americas, especially in the United States, among slaves brought from the Asante area. This particularly Akan practice of jumping the broom was picked up by other African ethnic groups in the Americas and used to solidify marriages during slavery among their communities. Jumping the broom therefore did not arise out of slavery as some have suggested, but is a part of African culture that survived the American slavery like the Voodoo religion of the Fon and Ewe ethnic groups or the ring shout ceremony of the BaKongo and Mbundu ethnic groups.

Decline

After the end of American slavery, jumping the broom was seldom practiced. It was not necessary once African-Americans could have European-style marriages with rings and other identifiers. Jumping the broom was always done before witnesses in order for members of the slave community to know a couple was married. It had nothing to do with Whites since no form of marriage was recognized for Blacks during slavery. Once Blacks could have European style weddings with rings that were recognizable by anyone as a symbol of marriage, the broom ceremony wasn't required.

Stigma

Jumping the broom also fell out of practice due to the stigma it carried, and in some cases still carries, among Black Americans wishing to forget the horrors of slavery. Once slavery had ended, many Blacks wanted nothing to do with anything associated with that era and discarded the broom jumping practice altogether. The practice did survive in some communities though, and made a resurgence after the launch of Alex Haley's "Roots".

EXTER AND TEMPIE A Love Story



Exter and Tempie Durham got married even though they lived on different plantations. They got married on the front porch of her master's house by jumping over a broom which was an African tradition from Ghana. Exter made Tempie a wedding ring out of a red button he carved and polished with a pocket knife. After that Exter stayed with her for one night, then had to return back to the Durham plantation the next day. For the rest of their marriage, whenever Exter wanted to visit Tempie, he had to get a permission slip from Master Durham. He was only allowed to visit from Saturday to Sunday evening. If a slave left his plantation without permission, he or she would get whipped. Slave marriages had no legal standing. The husband or wife could be sold anytime at the master's will. Exter and Tempie were lucky that neither of them ever got sold and they had a long marriage and got to keep their nine children. Many masters allowed their slaves to keep their families as long as they kept having children because that made them more valuable to them. Tempie wore her button ring that Exter gave her for 50 years until it got so thin she lost it while washing clothes in a washtub.

These brave people created their own rituals in spite of being enslaved. Imagine you are a slave married to someone on another plantation and write about what you think your experiences might have been like. How do you think this rare marriage survived?