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THE FOLKLORE OF WEDDINGS IN BRIDE MAGAZINES:

WHERE TRADITION MEETS MEDIA CONVENTION

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Celebrations of all sorts are of natural interest to the folklorist. Combining the use of traditional genres in innovative ways, folk groups in celebration explore, critique, and continually redefine their cultural frame of understanding. All of this, of course, is fascinating to the folklorist, who asks not whether to consider celebrations but rather, how to document and analyze all that is taking place.

Traditionally, folklorists studying celebration have focused on the classification of genres they encounter in the celebrations. This approach, however, is of rather limited use: As Robert J. Smith has said, emphasizing genres does not allow for consideration of the multiple and interrelated functions of the event (Smith 169). Smith, among others, has called for more relevant and accessible systems of analysis.

Popular magazines provide folklorists such access. In order to meet demand and sell their publications, magazines must stay abreast of the immediate concerns and changing traditions of their readers; their content must be relevant to the readers' lives. Media conventions, however, restrict the expressions of a magazine's content. The work of even the best writers, editors, and publishers is dictated by convention: expressions become patterned. By extension, then, the content of popular magazines is inherently accessible for academic inquiry.

Items of folklore found in popular magazines should not be presented as a mirror to the traditions they represent: Commercialism and bureaucracy are imbedded in the system and stand in the way of a clear or complete picture. But as folklorists' traditional approaches to complex, multi-genre subjects such as celebration continue to fall short (too often getting hung up on terminology and failing to systematically consider context), popular culture and media offer a working vocabulary and a framework from which we can at least begin meaningful dialogue. Popular media provides a set of terms that has relevance beyond academia, while the skewed nature of the pictures it offers itself becomes interesting material for debate. Beyond all this, however, popular magazines must be studied by folklorists, as they often have become a part of the traditions they represent, shaping our ideas of what is "right" and how things "should" be. Certainly this is true of bridal magazines and the folklore of weddings.

That folklore can be found in bride magazines is obvious: A casual reading of the various publications reveals multiple expressions of wedding customs, rituals, and beliefs. The purpose of this collection project, however, is not to merely count each mention of a folklore item, or even to arrange the items in exclusive categories. Classification, though an important element in a systematic study such as this, should not, as Robert Smith noted, be in itself the end goal. My purpose, rather, has been to identify themes in the bride magazines that are supported by the inclusion of specific folkloric references. Within the framework

of these themes, I have then documented both contexts and functions of the lore in order to facilitate discussion on the meaning of tradition in the wedding event and in its presentation in bridal magazines.

Bride magazines are highly visual in their content; many of us have been seduced by lavish gowns or exotic travel destinations pictured in the colorful pages of these publications. Such visual imagery would, in fact, lend itself well to folkloric study. This project, however, is not quite so ambitious: I have limited my collection to the written items of folklore found in the articles of twelve bride magazines. The four categories I had initially identified as themes have been trimmed to three, as shown in Figure 1. The categories are not mutually exclusive, but the figures do provide an indication of the volume of folklore items with which I have worked.

Visually, images of "Prince Charming," his beautiful bride, and their fairy tale happiness dominate bride magazines, and I assumed this would hold true in the written folklore as well. References to the chaste beginnings of blush veils and bridal white and to the magical beliefs of wearing a sixpence in one's shoe fall under what I labeled the "fairy tale" theme. This theme has been well-researched by folklorists such as Linda Degh and Kay F. Stone. Degh notes mass media's role in the decline of traditional storytelling, but asserts that on a more abstract level, the media keeps ingrained in our minds the "tale-like fulfillment" concept found in fairy tales such as Cinderella (Degh 66). Kay Stone

concurr, citing the familiar signs of the Cinderella story we encounter in "disguised" forms such as popular magazines (Stone 138): Femininity, submissiveness, and naivete certainly are embodied on the pages of bride magazines, while competition for men between women and the rags-to-riches story live on in the traditions of tossing the bouquet and the dollar dance. All told, I collected one hundred sixty items to support the "fairy tale" theme, and it seems reasonable to assume that a study of the visual imagery in bride magazines would identify even more liberal applications of the "Cinderella story." Whereas the "fairy tale" theme relies on an abstract concept, my second category, "rites of passage," seems fairly straightforward. Often identified by symbolic action(s), these items of folklore are represented more readily in print than in imagery: For this reason, I expected more than the one hundred twenty-three references to rites of passage I counted.

Arnold Van Gennep's classic study, The Rites of Passage, distinguishes three phases to the rite of passage. The first, the separation of the individual(s) from everyday life, is exemplified in wedding traditions both by the popular bachelor party and by the Jewish mikvah, a ceremonial cleansing. Van Gennep's second phase is marked by the instruction and transition of the person(s): Couples exchange vows and light a unity candle; women change their names and are carried over the threshold. Finally, a rite of passage is sealed by the reincorporation of the individual(s) into the community. This phase in the wedding event includes a bride's

bouquet toss, as well as the traditional showering of the couple with rice or birdseed to symbolize hopes of fertility. These customs are tangible; most are public knowledge. Barbara Myerhoff even suggests that in the self-creation of rites of passage lies an energy capable of building or regenerating a community (Myerhoff 131). Still, rites of passage are personal journeys: The meaning an individual or couple takes from the experience is tied to much deeper beliefs, and though bridal magazines have for many people become the primary guide to planning their weddings, most challenges to belief systems are carefully avoided in the publications.

Finally, I identified a category that laypersons would understand as representing a "festival" theme. Folklorists have struggled to distinguish the structure and functions of festivals, but again, for these purposes we need only a working vocabulary from which to build our understanding. Festivals are, in fact, marked by certain structural elements: Our expectations of a festival generally include some opportunity for feast and drink, and certain mores of behavior are applied. Most importantly, though, festivals are an occasion to interact and to bond: As Robert Smith states, in festival we come together "to express collective emotions and loyalties" (Smith 167). Wedding receptions, obviously, can claim this purpose, as the dancing, toasts, and traditional foods common to receptions all serve to build a sense of community. The festival atmosphere of the wedding event, however, can actually be found as soon as an engagement is

announced: Parents bless the union, while a newspaper announcement builds community expectations. The wedding ceremony is also marked by the couple's celebration of community and ethnicity. Special readings or music are often chosen, and wedding programs are frequently provided for guests in order to explain the various traditions. One magazine story described a couple's innovative use of communal tradition in their marriage ceremony: Their chuppah, the canopy under which Jewish weddings take place, was actually a patchwork quilt, with pieces designed and donated by guests who could not attend the event. The magazine lauded this gesture as a touching display of community.

The surprise to me in the festival category was its sheer volume: I collected two hundred sixty-seven items related to the community theme. Bride magazines, and indeed weddings in general, place a great deal of focus on the bride, encouraging her to indulge her whims and promising her unrivaled attention. The references in the magazines to this festival theme, however, seem to suggest that guests at a wedding not be treated as a passive audience. I counted six references in the twelve publications to dramatic elements of the wedding event, but I had to drop the idea of "drama" as separate fourth theme for this project: the magazines simply do not approach weddings with this sort of objective distance. Instead, I listed drama as an aspect of "play" within the festival theme.

Gregory Bateson, in his Steps to an Ecology of Mind, discusses the "framing" of an event, and his insight can be applied to the

treatment of weddings in bridal magazines. Bateson distinguishes "ritual frame" from "play frame" and suggests that participants in an event reject most violations of the distinction. The wedding event, of course, has aspects of both ritual and play, and the two do exist simultaneously: The bouquet toss, for example, serves a ritual function even as it becomes an entertaining game. In general, though, the "play" involved in a wedding comes before and after the ceremony, which remains the central focus of the event. Couples may choose to incorporate playful aspects into the ritual of the ceremony--two magazines described wedding programs that were designed like Broadway playbills--but the "frame" for ceremonies generally remains one of ritual. To describe the whole event as a drama, then, would violate this frame and demean the ritual importance of the ceremony; such an attitude found in a bridal magazine would likely insult the readers.

Popular magazines work because the frames of reference they use match those of their readers. Bridal magazines, in order to be accepted (and to sell), must reflect the readers' understanding of marriage and of weddings. As their industry appears to be thriving, we folklorists can assume that bride magazines have located a successful formula for reaching their readers. We should study this formula. We could learn from it. Because although commercial culture does not mirror reality, folklorists are naive to ignore the impact of commercial culture on the "folk" perception and experience of that reality.

PRIMARY SOURCES

Bridal Guide, published by Globe Communications

Issues: July/ August 1992
September/ October 1992
November/ December 1992

Bride's and Your New Home, published by Conde Nast Publications

Issues: August/ September 1992
October/ November 1992
December 1992/ January 1993

Elegant Bride, published by Pace Communications

Issues: August/ September 1992
October/ November 1992
December 1992/ January 1993

Modern Bride, published by American Bride Publications

Issues: August/ September 1992
October/ November 1992
December 1992/ January 1993

OTHER WORKS CONSULTED

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Brill, Mordecai L., Marlene Halpin, and William H. Genne. Write Your Own Wedding. Piscataway, N.J.: New Century, 1973; 1985.

Degh, Linda. "The Magic Tale and Its Magic." In Fairy Tales as Ways of Knowing: Essays on Marchen in Psychology, Society, and Literature. Las Vegas: Lang, 1981.

Green, Thomas A. "Toward a Definition of Folk Drama." Journal of American Folklore 91 (1978): 843-850.

Myerhoff, Barbara. "Rites of Passage: Process and Paradox." In Celebration: Studies in Festivity and Ritual. Victor Turner, ed. Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution, 1982.

Nordtvedt, Matilda and Pearl Steinkuehler. Something Borrowed, Something Blue. Chicago: Moody, 1981.

Smith, Robert J. "Festivals and Celebrations." In Folklore and Folklife: An Introduction. Richard Dorson, ed. Chicago: University of Chicago, 1972.

Stone, Kay F. "The Misuses of Enchantment: Controversies on the Significance of Fairy Tales." In Women's Folklore, Women's Culture. Rosan Jordan and Susan Kalcik, eds. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 1985.

Turner, Victor. "Introduction." In Celebration: Studies in Festivity and Ritual. Turner, ed. Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution, 1982.

Van Gennep, Arnold. The Rites of Passage. Chicago: University of Chicago, 1908; 1960.

APPENDIX

FIGURE 1: SOME THEMES IN THE FOLKLORE OF BRIDE MAGAZINES
(AS FOUND IN THREE ISSUES EACH OF FOUR MAGAZINES)

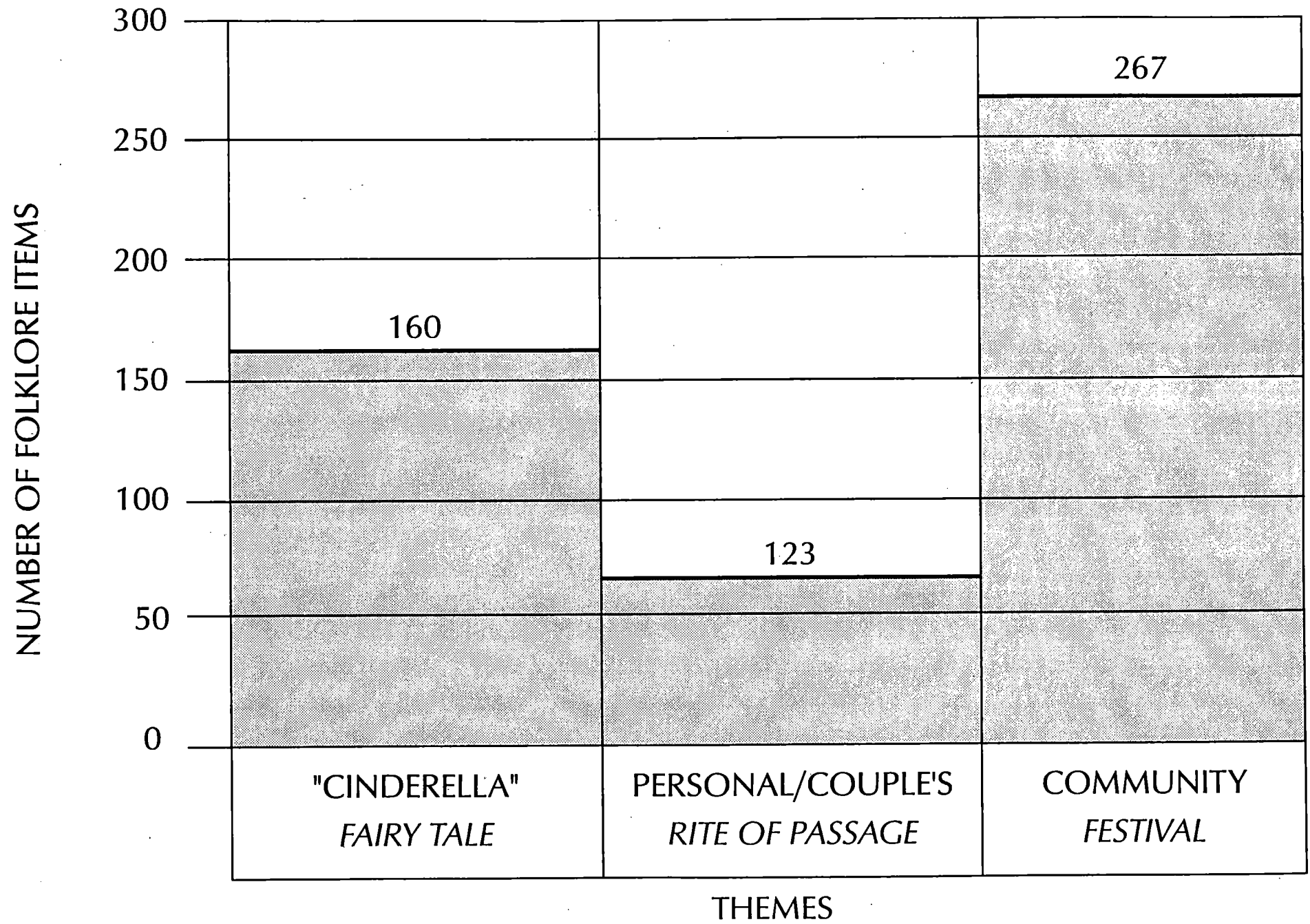
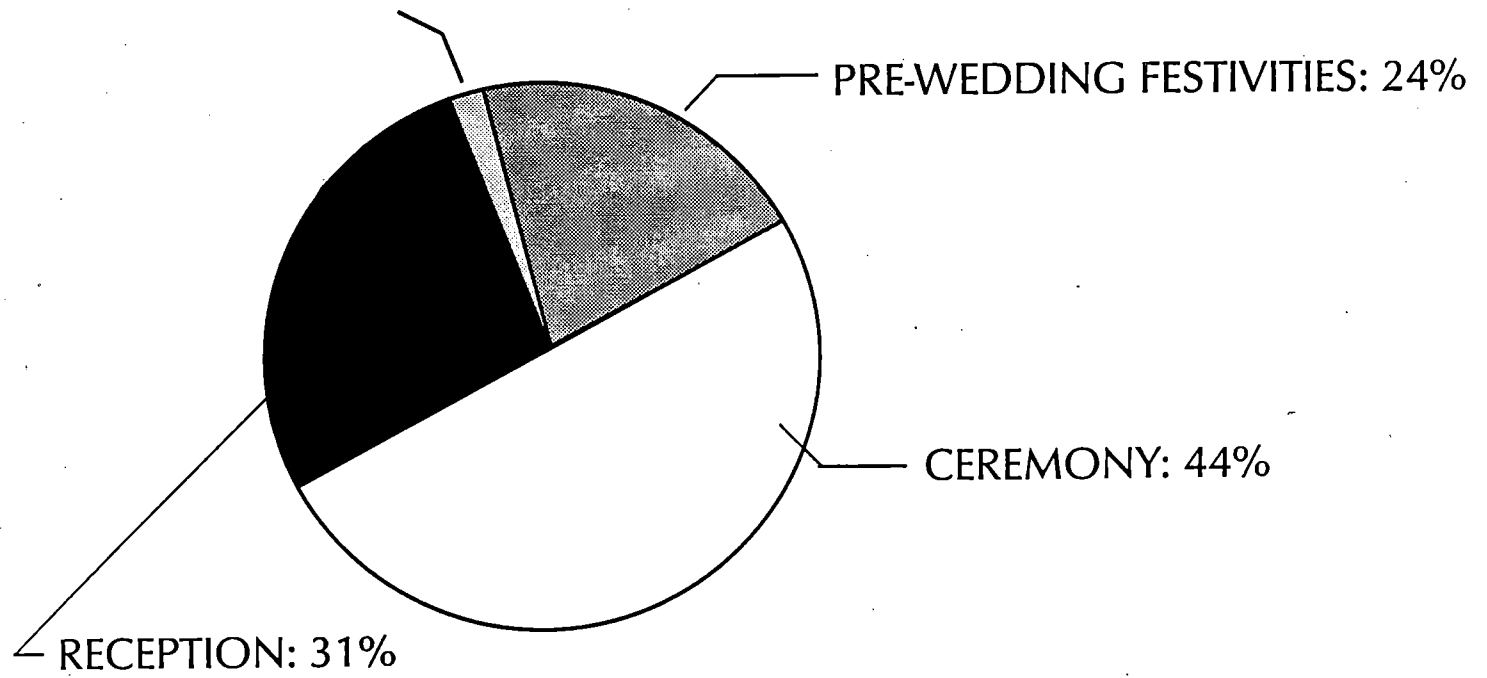


FIGURE 2A: APPLICATION OF "FAIRY TALE" THEME IN BRIDE MAGAZINES
(AS FOUND IN THREE ISSUES EACH OF FOUR MAGAZINES)

OTHER (GENERAL APPLICATION): 1%



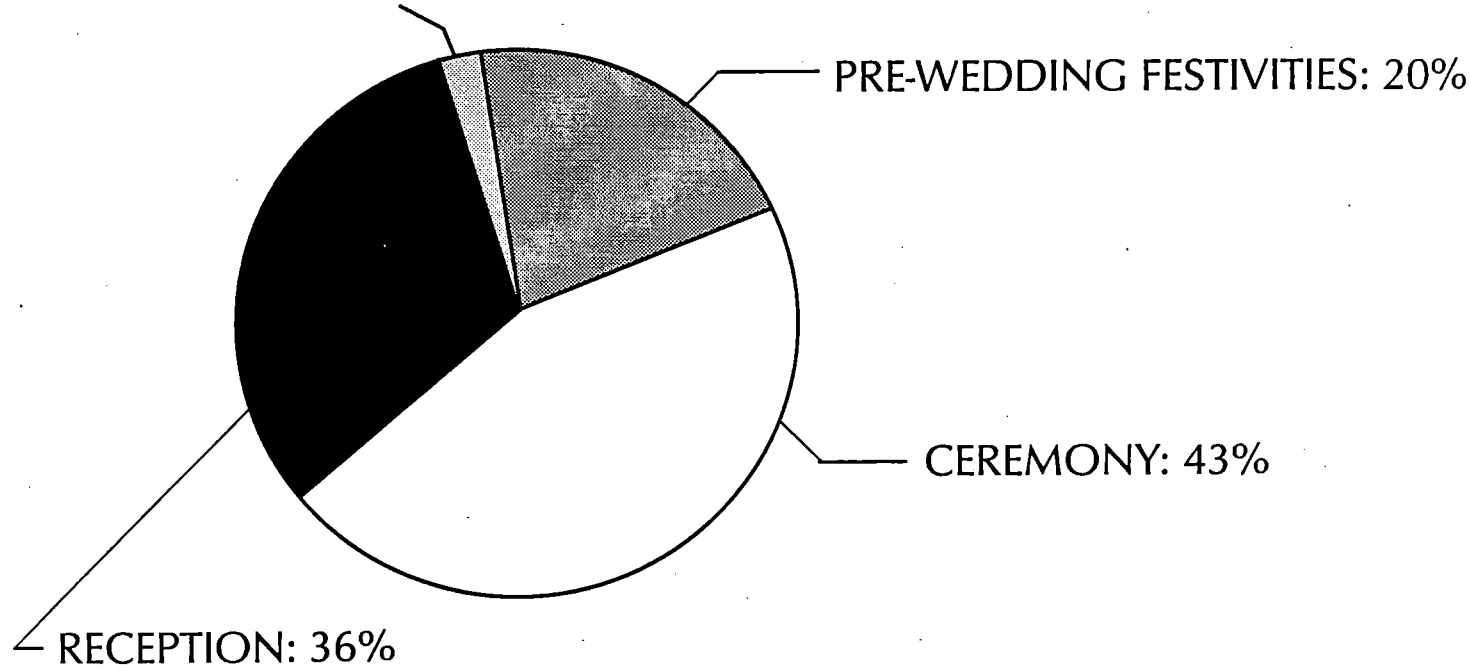
NUMBER OF "FAIRY TALE" ITEMS	
PRE-WEDDING FESTIVITIES	39
CEREMONY	70
RECEPTION	50
OTHER (GENERAL APPLICATION)	1
TOTAL	160

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 FIGURE 2B: ITEMS OF "FAIRY TALE" THEME IN FOUR BRIDE MAGAZINES
 (AS FOUND IN THREE ISSUES OF EACH MAGAZINE)*

CATEGORY AND EXAMPLES	ELEGANT BRIDE	MODERN BRIDE	BRIDE'S AND YOUR HOME	BRIDAL GUIDE	TOTAL
COSTUME: white gown; long train; veil; garter; trousseau	8	28	12	9	57
JOURNEY: aisle runner; flower petals; doves; carriage; threshold	10	18	9	4	41
"TRANSFER": "given away"; name change; bouquet toss; cake charms	10	2	5	6	23
GIFTS: showers; money games	2	15	2	6	25
CHARMS/SUPERSTITIONS: hope chest; six pence in shoe	6	3	1	3	13
OTHER: Springtime	1	0	0	0	1
*Issues used were 8/92 - 9/92; 10/92 - 11/92; and 12/92 - 1/93, except <u>Bridal Guide</u> (7/92-8/92; 9/92 - 10/92; and 11/92 - 12/92)	37	66	29	28	160

FIGURE 3A: APPLICATION OF "RITE OF PASSAGE" THEME IN BRIDE MAGAZINES
(AS FOUND IN THREE ISSUES EACH OF FOUR MAGAZINES)

OTHER (GENERAL APPLICATION): 1%



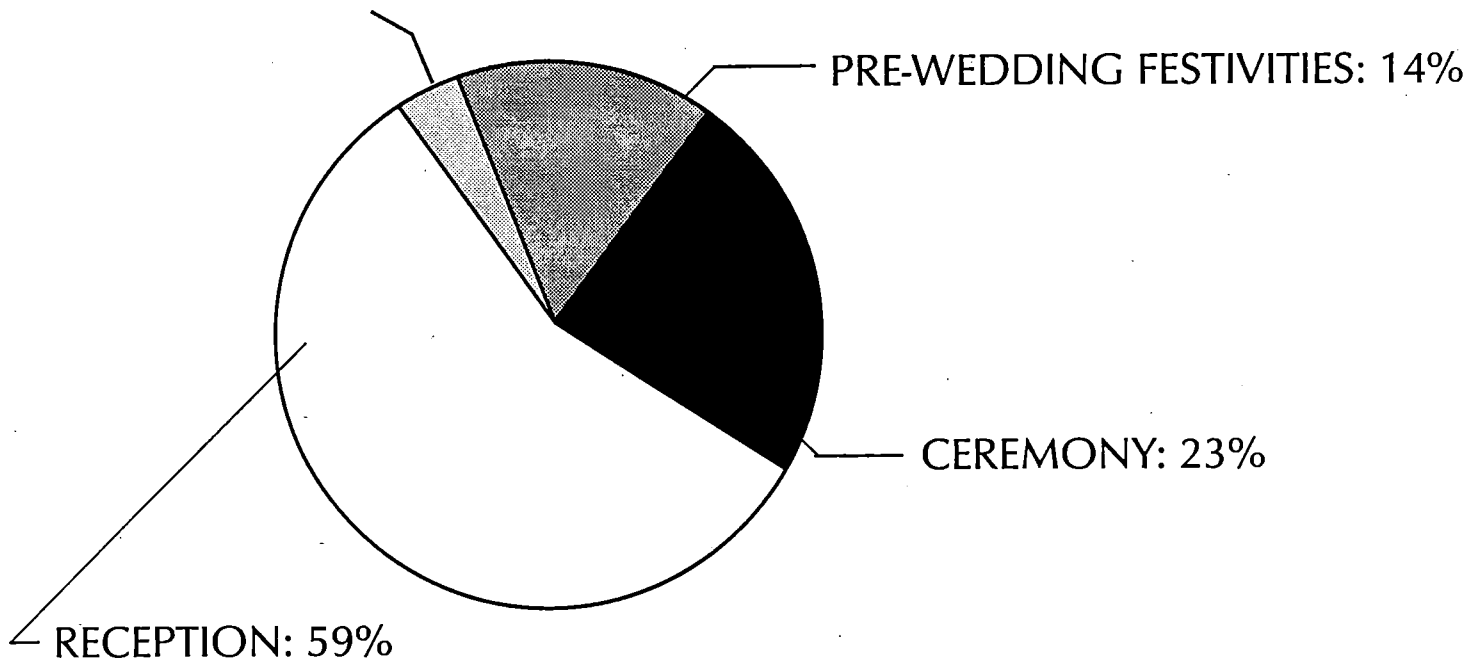
NUMBER OF "RITE OF PASSAGE" ITEMS	
PRE-WEDDING FESTIVITIES	25
CEREMONY	52
RECEPTION	45
OTHER (GENERAL APPLICATION)	1
TOTAL	123

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 FIGURE 3B: ITEMS OF "RITE OF PASSAGE" THEME IN FOUR BRIDE MAGAZINES
 (AS FOUND IN THREE ISSUES OF EACH MAGAZINE)*

CATEGORY AND EXAMPLES	ELEGANT BRIDE	MODERN BRIDE	BRIDE'S AND YOUR HOME	BRIDAL GUIDE	TOTAL
"LAST CHANCE": bachelor party	1	8	5	3	17
CLEANSING: ceremonial washing; breaking glass	1	5	0	1	7
TOGETHERNESS: ring exchange; unity candle; cutting cake; first dance	17	21	6	6	50
NEW ROLES: vows; name change; capping; marriage contract; threshold	3	12	7	1	23
"PLACE" IN COMMUNITY: crossed sword; bouquet toss; rice or birdseed	13	3	4	5	25
OTHER: rite of passage (general)	0	0	1	0	1
*Issues used were 8/92 - 9/92; 10/92 - 11/92; and 12/92 - 1/93, except <u>Bridal Guide</u> (7/92-8/92; 9/92 - 10/92; and 11/92 - 12/92)	35	49	23	16	123

FIGURE 4A: APPLICATION OF "FESTIVAL" THEME IN BRIDE MAGAZINES
(AS FOUND IN THREE ISSUES EACH OF FOUR MAGAZINES)

OTHER (GENERAL APPLICATION): 4%



NUMBER OF "FESTIVAL" ITEMS	
PRE-WEDDING FESTIVITIES	37
CEREMONY	61
RECEPTION	157
OTHER (GENERAL APPLICATION)	12
TOTAL	267

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 FIGURE 4B: ITEMS OF "FESTIVAL" THEME IN FOUR BRIDE MAGAZINES
 (AS FOUND IN THREE ISSUES OF EACH MAGAZINE)*

CATEGORY AND EXAMPLES	ELEGANT BRIDE	MODERN BRIDE	BRIDE'S AND YOUR HOME	BRIDAL GUIDE	TOTAL
COMMUNITY: religion; ethnic food/music; heirloom; holiday; quilt	15	48	25	6	94
PLAY: dance; games; drama; chivarie	0	22	11	2	35
FORMULARIZED "GOOD TIDINGS": rice or birdseed; toast	11	17	4	8	40
FORMULARIZED "PASSING ON": cake charms; bouquet/garter toss; favors	19	7	5	7	38
OTHER RITUALIZED EXPRESSIONS: parent's blessing; news announcemnt; receiving line	5	27	13	15	60
*Issues used were 8/92 - 9/92; 10/92 - 11/92; and 12/92 - 1/93, except <u>Bridal Guide</u> (7/92-8/92; 9/92 - 10/92; and 11/92 - 12/92)	50	121	58	38	267