Weddings in Botswana are increasingly being marked by emerging complexities for a younger generation in the way these events draw upon different social, cultural, economic, legal and moral sources and resources. Since this complexity represents a new mixture of sources that are local and global, traditional and modern, and part of a civil system as well as part of the rising consumerist style, the people involved require a new set of skills and competences to ensure their wedding is a success. With weddings emerging as a new social cocktail, it is difficult to identify whether the elements are traditional by origin, have been adapted from elsewhere or are entirely new innovations. This contribution argues that much of the transformative innovation is located in the rise of these skills and competences. It identifies four interlocking domains that are part of the organization and styling of weddings for which an innovation in the personalized skills and competences of couples has become crucial. Although rituals are always adaptive to changing social environments, the rise of these new skills and competences is not merely adaptive but changes social, gender, economic and age-related structures as is manifest in these weddings.

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Introduction

In bookshops in some of the urban centres of Botswana, such as the capital Gaborone but also in smaller towns such as Molepolole and Mochudi, there are increasing numbers of glossies portraying the splendour and grandiose style of so-called white weddings. These have become very popular and are innovatively instilling Western and global upper-middle-class lifestyles and appetites within local settings. While these weddings seem to be responding to consumerist ideas of the arrangement of relationships in a modern African society (for Nigeria, see Bastian 2001), they emulate the emergent interests of a younger generation and are simultaneously responding to traditional cultural requirements, the strictures of the country’s civic system and Christian moral notions. In the peri-urban agro-town of Molepolole (an hour’s drive from Gaborone), what can be seen emerging in these costly, lavishly-styled weddings is a highly complex ‘cocktail’ of arrangements, appetites, styles, formal requirements and ritual procedures that are difficult to disentangle. This complexity makes it analytically challenging to distinguish and classify elements of local culture according to ‘tradition’, ‘innovation’ or ‘adaptation’. Where does one category begin and the other end?

In being a ‘social cocktail’, these weddings challenge social science in perceiving or maintaining such categories of analysis. Yet they also challenge the young couples themselves as these weddings signal a mix of constraints and the competences they need to acquire in dealing with the entire process. None of these styles, appetites or traditional requirements come uncontested or effortlessly. This is partly because in a locality such as Molepolole, weddings are part of what Appadurai (1996) has called a production of locality in which a precise ‘mixture’ of what are considered ‘local customs’ and engagements with a wider world of style, aesthetics but also citizenship and class aspirations are being pursued. Such a production of locality – in the context of this contribution, the production of local ritual ceremonies that constitute a marriage – requires detailed knowledge of how and what to mix. The innovative capacity these groups espouse, it is argued here, must be analyzed in terms of how new competences emerge in the negotiation of a tantalizing social cocktail.

Exploring issues of adaptation and innovation should also focus not only on that which is being produced (i.e. the innovative artefact, object or technique) but also on its reception, contestation and (internal) contradictions (Ferguson 1999). In the case of these weddings, the competences that are required in order to deal with all of these dimensions are