



IMAGENU

Policy Brief

No. 3, March, 2024

“Weddings are big business” - support the professionalization of service providers in the marriage economy

Nanna Schneidermann and Stephen Langole

Executive summary

The wedding industry in Northern Uganda reflects a dynamic intersection of tradition, capitalism and globalization. Entrepreneurs navigate social and economic challenges through social networks, exhibiting adaptability and resilience. This growing sector holds promise for economic growth and security but requires careful cultivation to ensure stability and sustainability. The research suggests that community standards for services and payments, accessible education and public debates on changing economies of marriage could support this development.

Introduction

Many Ugandans feel that lavish marriage celebrations and weddings are too expensive, contributing to making marriage an exclusive institution only available for affluent families. On the other hand, the big celebrations provide jobs for young entrepreneurs as caterers, decorators, videographers, entertainers etc., which enables them to provide for their own families. This brief addresses the growing small-scale wedding industry in Northern Uganda and is aimed at entrepreneurs in this business, customers and politicians. It is based on studies carried out between 2019 and 2022 as part of the IMAGENU (Imagining Gender Futures in Uganda) research project funded by Danida and carried out by researchers from Gulu, Copenhagen and Aarhus Universities.

The Institute of Peace and Strategic Studies (IPSS), Gulu University is implementing the Imagining Gender Futures in Uganda (IMAGENU) project, a four-year research collaboration bringing together researchers from Gulu University (Uganda), Aarhus University and University of Copenhagen in Denmark. This project is supported by the Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs through Danida Fellowship Centre in Denmark and aims to build research capacity in universities between the global North and South.



The Ugandan economy has historically relied heavily on agriculture and manufacturing. But today service industries make up just under 45% of the Gross National Product and are the largest overall sector in the economy. At the same time, 70% of the population relies on agriculture as subsistence and cash crop farmers. In a future where climate change will make farming a less feasible way of life, it is expected that young people will pursue a future in the service industries in cities, as they are relatively less impacted by climate change. Our studies of the emerging wedding industry in Northern Uganda exemplify this tendency.

Background

In the past, family members were expected to provide both funds and labor for marriage celebrations preparing bride wealth, food, clothes, entertainment, decoration and hosting guests from afar. But over the past decades, Ugandan wedding culture has turned towards more lavish events and this has created a growing labour market for small-scale entrepreneurs who are hired as “service providers” for some or all aspects of marriage and wedding celebrations. Some cultural leaders decry the commercialization of the celebrations, arguing that unions are less stable when strangers provide the labor involved. Nonetheless, the wedding industry is emerging as a subset of the creative service economies. In Northern Uganda, this field holds particular meaning as a space for celebrating unity, love, and culture in the wake of the war 1986-2006.

Approach and methodology

In 2019-2022 the IMAGENU team conducted studies on weddings, economy and emotions entwining in the fast-growing city of Gulu, in Northern Uganda. We have used qualitative methods in the form of participant observation, interviews, focus group discussions and auto-ethnography to examine shifts in economies of marriage and their implication for future generations.

Findings

In Kampala, the annual trade fair Bride and Groom Expo showcases the Ugandan wedding industry with its hundreds of stands, where prospective clients can find their “service providers” in anything from bridal gowns to bakeries, wedding venues, event planners, or mixologists.



In secondary cities, the wedding economy is less established and smaller, but has become a site for entrepreneurship over the past decade.

A survey of 26 wedding media service providers in Gulu town provides insights into this emerging economy. The 14 studios participating in the survey were all owned or managed by young men in their 20s and 30s. One-third of the respondents had a diploma or higher education, and the rest had secondary education. The studios employed between 3 and 14 people, with additional casual workers. All had additional sources of income such as agriculture, small businesses or manual labour. Other types of service providers in the wedding economy such as fashion, catering, decor, or bakery were led by more female entrepreneurs. But the tendency that it is young, well-educated people who pursue weddings as a business is also reflected here.

Entrepreneurs in the wedding industry in Gulu are masters of “social bricolage” - making do with the resources at hand to provide solutions for social problems and gaps in the market. Young entrepreneurs in the creative industries are sometimes vilified as “lazy youths who want easy money”. Clients desire exclusive events and entrepreneurs work creatively to develop innovative services and products that match local and global trends in wedding cultures. The work is often precarious and physically taxing, intersecting with both formal and informal economies. The social aspect both reflects the mobilisation and recruitment of workers through social networks, but also the more hierarchical networks that service providers build with clients. A challenge for both workers, employers and clients is to define standards for services and payments.

Both service providers and clients experience what they called “disappointments”. For service providers it could mean not being paid for their services, late cancellations, or abuse while on the job at parties. For clients it could mean that agreed services are



not provided, withheld pending full payment, or not of the agreed quality. Thus both sides of the transaction spend considerable time and labour in building their mutual relationship to ensure trust and accountability, likening the business relationship to a more traditional patron-client relationship. As one service provider put it when talking about a wealthy client: “Imagine, they never paid for me [for what I provided for their wedding]. But I didn’t say anything, because this is a very big man. Maybe in the future, he will help me....”

Recommendations

Actors	Action and outcome
Entrepreneurs City commercial officers Tax authorities	Form and strengthen professional associations and communities of practice for service providers. This will facilitate knowledge sharing, establish standards, and promote ethical business practices.
Professional associations	Develop community standards emphasizing safe working conditions, transparency, quality, and ethical conduct. This can help mitigate disappointments and disputes, fostering a more stable business environment.
Vocational schools Faculties of Business and Development Studies	Develop targeted, affordable, module-based training for the new service industries, i.e. on human resources, management, marketing, and financial management. This enhances skills of well-educated self-employed workers and small business owners and contribute to industry development.
Politicians Cultural leaders research institutions	Facilitate open debates about the changing economies of marriages, moving beyond traditionalist discourses. More realistic perspectives will contribute to more inclusive institutions responding to evolving societal norms.