

RENT A VICAR

The role of the white guy in Japanese wedding ceremonies

THE DOORS AT THE BACK OF THE CHAPEL SWING OPEN TO REVEAL THE COUPLE. The groom in a white morning suit, the bride in strapless white satin with rows of frills down the skirt. Her face is covered with a lace veil which reaches to her waist. As the four-woman choir sings *Ave Maria*, the couple bow low to the congregation. They are seconds away from realising their life-long ambition, to walk the Virgin Road, the central aisle of the chapel, and to be married in a Christian wedding ceremony.

Waiting for the couple at the end of the road is the Englishman, Chris, in a flashy golden gown with a silk stole. Chris begins by 'announcing' the wedding and saying the name of the bride and groom very carefully, 'so that I don't get it wrong because that can be a big problem if you do.' Chris has written their names down twice on his script.

The congregation stands and sings hymn No. 320, *What a Friend We Have in Jesus*, in Japanese. The ceremony is roughly sixty per cent in Japanese and forty per cent in English. 'The English is there to add a little bit of exotic flavour to it.'

Chris then reads from Corinthians 13:4, 'Love is gentle, and love is kind...'

'I do that in Japanese first and then in English, and then we do the exchange of vows, "Do you take this man to be your lawful wedded husband", or whatever it is in English. "*Hai, chikaimasu*" [I do].'

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Next comes the part the bride has been dreaming about all her life. She turns to the groom who lifts her veil and plants an awkward kiss on her lips. Kissing is a Western concept which was only introduced into Japan after the Second World War. Japanese people dislike seeing or doing it in public, but at a wedding ceremony it is viewed as the height of romantic love. To cover the couple's blushes they have selected a swirling cloud of dry ice from the list of optional extras.

Rings are exchanged and the couple sign the register. At this point, they have chosen another extra: a black gospel soloist singing *You Are So Beautiful* unaccompanied.

Next, Chris says the prayer. For this he prefers to use his own bible. 'It's not too heavy, it's just the right size and it's black. The Jehovah's Witnesses gave it to me when they came to my house a million years ago trying to recruit me.' He places the bible on his lectern and calls the couple forward. 'They put their hands on it and I put my stole on top of their hands and kind of sandwich their hands like that.'

Finally, Chris makes the declaration, the *kekkon sengen*, that the couple are now married. There is applause, and the newlyweds turn to their guests and bow low again. 'And then I do a blessing and that's it, they're out the door.'

As the couple are applauded down the aisle they are covered in another optional extra, the Flower Shower, or petal confetti. It's all over in 17 minutes.

There's just one small issue. Chris didn't marry the couple. Chris isn't a priest. He's not a pastor or a minister or a monk. He has no religious authority whatsoever. He's a 'rent-a-vicar'.

The Japanese wedding industry is a multi-billion yen business, vying for the custom of approximately 700,000 couples a year. Whereas in the West a couple might hire a wedding planner, in Japan the whole day is organised by one-stop bridal companies who own their own mock chapels inside purpose-built wedding 'guesthouses', oversee the catering, rent the bride her gowns, book the MC and the choir, arrange the optional extras, and hire foreigners like Chris.

The most desired wedding is the Disney Royal Dream ceremony offered by Tokyo Disneyland. It takes place in Cinderella Castle

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where 'your childhood dream of a princess wedding comes true as you spend the day in the magical, dream-like ambience of this wedding program.' The couple get a lot for 7,500,000 yen (approximately £43,000), including a banquet for up to fifty guests, wedding apparel (two sets, each chosen from a range of Disney Princess costumes such as Cinderella, Snow White or Belle), location photographs (three poses), flower arrangements, flower shower, glass place cards, an MC (dressed as a page from Cinderella), and background music. And as a Program Privilege, 'Mickey Mouse, Minnie Mouse, Donald Duck and Daisy Duck will appear dressed up in formal attire at the wedding reception to wish the bride and groom all the best.'

There is no end to the wedding options a couple can choose. But they all have one thing in common. None of them has any legal validity; they are simply parties. To be married in Japan, a couple simply has to sign and submit a piece of paper, a *kekkon todoke*, or marriage registration, at their local ward or city office. By the time the couple take their first steps down the Virgin Road, they are already legally married.

Japan is not a Christian country. Only one per cent of Japan's 127 million population claim to be Christian, yet three-quarters of marrying couples (who decide to have a service) choose a Christian wedding ceremony. Around twelve per cent opt for a Shinto ceremony which, although presided over by a real priest, has no legal authority either. And Shinto ceremonies are not popular with brides because they are only allowed one change of clothing, the traditional white kimono with a white hood to hide their 'horns', a symbol of the inherent evil nature of women. It's no wonder they hold out for the kiss.

Chris has no problem with his job. 'Since there is no legal or religious dimension to the ceremony itself I have no qualms about doing it on any level at all.' Chris arrived in Japan as a backpacker 25 years ago. He teaches English at two high schools, and is the lead singer/guitarist in a rock band called Edward's Operation. For many years he also did talent work; he appeared on commercials and television shows as a foreign face. He got into the wedding business 14 years ago, and is currently employed directly by the Music Grace wedding company, which has its own

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chapel and banqueting hall in south Tokyo. He gets 7,000 yen (£40) per ceremony which he is not happy about. Additionally, when he started out, he had to buy his own black gown, a cheap import from Korea which cost 15,000 yen (£87). 'It actually cost 10,000 yen (£58) but my boss took 5,000 yen (£29) off the top.'

A few years ago, a reporter from the *Taipei Times* interviewed Chris and then wrote that he and his ilk were frauds. *The Japan Times* called them 'phoney as hell'. The BBC quoted a genuine Japanese Christian priest as saying, 'It is a real problem for us. They are not genuine and they give us a bad name. It is important for the bride and groom to have a proper wedding and they're not getting it from these fake priests.' In fact, it is their Japanese employers who use the term *bokushi* (priest). Chris and his colleagues prefer the English term, 'celebrant'.

Recently Chris's wedding company arranged some kind of tie-up with the local Hase Baptist Church. He believes that the company received a certificate with his name on it and, 'if anyone presses us, we are supposed to answer, "We are attached to this church and therefore we have the right to conduct wedding ceremonies".' In Japan, the whole 'celebrant' issue is as misty as the optional dry ice. But if the ceremony itself is not a legal one and the couple know it, to what extent are Chris and his cohorts deceiving them? If a Japanese couple insist on being married by a genuine priest, can their marriage really be ordained by a Christian God if they themselves are not Christian? Indeed, if the couple aren't Christians, what right have they to demand a genuine priest?

'There is a general move to try and give some authenticity to the celebrants,' says Chris, 'but, in my opinion, it's pretty meaningless because the ceremonies themselves don't have any real meaning. There's no point in trying to pretend that we have some kind of authority or permission to do this.'

Couples are free to choose a Japanese celebrant, especially if they are concerned about the English language sections of the ceremony, but they rarely do. Tall and thin, Chris looks the part of a kindly village curate. 'The point about me of course is that I'm white and so that adds an air of authenticity since obviously the image of it is "the West".'

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The White Male is a commodified symbol in Asia, utilised as an image of success and upward mobility in advertising, and to lend authority to corporate and academic settings. White males are seen by many Asian women as more desirable marriage partners than their own countrymen, while Asian businesses note the power of the white man to boost business. In China, for example, there is a fashion for hiring white men as fake partners at business meetings to bring an air of authenticity and make the company appear more international. Called 'white guy window dressing', in the Japanese wedding industry it's what the clients want and the bridal companies must provide. As one prospective groom noted to the BBC, 'It would seem very unreal and fake if there was a Japanese person conducting the ceremony. Very shady actually.'

After the worldwide broadcast of the marriage of Prince Charles to Lady Diana Spencer in 1981, bridal companies were swift to borrow the exotic and sophisticated Christian traditions of the white wedding without much thought as to the religious foundations from which they had grown. Says Chris, 'It's the archetypal form over content thing since it has no meaning whatsoever apart from it looks nice and she wants to wear a white dress.' The walk down the aisle (the Virgin Road), the princess dresses, the prayers, the kiss, the signing of the register and even Chris are there because of the importance to the Japanese of ritual, and of the value placed on the performance of cultural events in a society which is not religious in the Western sense of the word.

'The Japanese like their ceremonies and their meetings and their formal occasions. Just the mere fact of everybody assembling together and going through some form of ritual, the Japanese are particularly keen on that,' says Chris. 'Look at their culture in general, they've got so many events and festivals. And I'm sure this just slots right in there.'

Moreover, Japan's non-legal ceremonies can say more than a legal bond. Indeed, lacking any legal validity, the non-legal ceremony can circumnavigate the law and leap legal loopholes where it lags behind modern mores. In 2012, Disney hosted its first same-sex wedding when a lesbian couple were able to declare their non-legal union to the world with Mickey, Minnie and a

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Venetian gondola ride. Those who criticise the 'fake priests' and the mock Christian wedding ceremony are missing the point. It's not about religion, it's not about legality, it's about the public expression of a milestone in life. Chris agrees. 'I'm just providing a service. It doesn't have any religious significance, the ceremonies are not recognised by any churches as having any religious validity, the law doesn't recognise them as having any legal validity so if I can give them a memorable day, something they can look back on with fond memories and some nice photographs, then I feel that my job is done.'

In 2012, the first robot wedding ceremony was held in Japan. The couple walked up the aisle to the tune of *Ave Maria* and were 'married' by an I-Fairy robot wearing a garland of white flowers on its head. As it pronounced the couple man and wife, its eyes flashed green and blue. Chris could soon find himself looking for other part-time work.

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