



# *A wedding in Sana'a*

## *Under the balto's nothing but colours, colours, colours*

A minute after they left the car, the women take off their balto's and finish what they started at home. The curls pinned on their heads are undone and waterfalls of black hair come down. Faces are powdered until some of them have the colour of a Japanese geisha. Eyes are shadowed in the same colour of the dress and high heels are taken from a plastic bag, in which the balto is stuffed.

By Judith Spiegel

Tonight, the black balto is replaced by colours, colours, colours. It is replaced by purple dresses with golden paillettes, yellow gowns with flowery designs, blue mini skirts with high heeled boots, red dresses with silver buckles, golden creations with matching earrings and handbags with tiger prints. But also by jeans and traditional dresses from the village. Anything goes, as long as it is not white. White is for the bride. Tonight is the big night of Shams (sun). She is getting married to Hussein. On the invitation it is written that "this is the wedding of the most beautiful and precious human being, who is a princess and her wedding will spread the scent of a flower". But before the princess will enter the stage, there are three hours to kill. Three hours

in which groups of girls divide their time between sitting down at one of the big round tables in the wedding hall, going to and from the toilets to check on their hair and dancing. The latter is the responsibility of DJ Mohammed Algeer, tucked away in some side room where he cannot see the colourful world of the wedding hall. He throws in song after song. Especially the Egyptian songs make the girls go up the tables or the catwalk where later on, we expect bride Shams to parade towards her throne. But Shams is still not here yet, she is at the photo shop, having her wedding pictures made. Meanwhile the girls swing their hips and shake their butts to the Egyptian mega-hits. They look like birds of paradise. When the music stops, they sound

like birds of paradise as well. Yemeni weddings do not come cheap. DJ Mohammed costs at least 500 USD. The throne for the bride is another 350 USD, the hall is rented for 1000 USD, and then there was yesterday's party as well. And the one on the day before yesterday. Which comes down to three different dresses. An average white dress goes for 1000 USD, or can be rented for 100 USD. Weddings plunge into the family budget. Often money is borrowed from friends to finance the wedding. A simple, cheap wedding, is out of the question. Family, friends and neighbours expect a big feast. Between the golden rimmed chairs, children run around. A little boy in very large yellow shorts tries his luck on the catwalk. Only



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a few more years and he will no longer be allowed to attend these female settings. The five huge chandeliers which are hanging above the catwalk have seen it before and will see it again. They have seen the sexy dresses. They have seen that these girls and women are proud of their bodies. They have seen that these girls do not try to hide an

extra ounce or two of body weight. Or the straps of their bra's. Every day they see what half of the Yemeni population never sees. But they also see the signs of poverty, even here. Not every dress is without wholes. Not every worn out foot in a plastic flip flop can be hidden by the long gowns. And here, these signs are more painful than anywhere else.

Three hours are gone. Some of the guests show signs of boredom or fatigue. The same group of girls is going to the toilets again. To check hair and make up one more time. Rumour goes that the bride is on her way to the party. Some women quickly cover their faces. The entrance of the bride is filmed by a camera, and they do not want to appear on any film or photo.

There are no other camera's at the wedding, at any wedding, whatsoever. They are strictly forbidden and handbags are checked thoroughly before entering the party. In the past, pictures of the scarcely dressed and heavily made up girls were put on internet. In a country where a husband often is not supposed to see his bride before the wedding, leave alone that other men can see her this is impossible.

Finally, there she is, in a white dress with silver roses. The not so very romantic white lights are dimmed, a last tuff of hair is adjusted, the abundant make up checked one more time and there Shams goes, down the catwalk. Surely, but slowly. Very slowly indeed. After every step she stops to show herself to the audience, so they have time to admire her attire. Escorted by her sister in law, it takes Shams 30 minutes to reach her clapping and cheering friends at the other end of the catwalk. An average of one meter per minute. Quite fast, according to experts. While Shams is safely seated on her enormous golden-white throne, pink plastic bags are distributed among the guests. They contain a can of Shani ("Fruit Flavor Drink") and a burger. Not long after, the hall looks like a Mc Donalds on a very busy day. Tissues, empty cans and empty burger boxes are all over the place and people start to leave.

One hour later, the remaining women grab their plastic bags and cover themselves in their balto's. In a few minutes, the hall turns from a gathering of tropical birds into a gathering of black crows. The brother of the bride has entered the scene. He will bring his sister Shams to her husband Hussein, who appears on the catwalk not long after. He looks a bit shy and nervous. The brother of the bride kisses Hussein. The bride does not. The sister of the groom sighs: "I want this too, I want to be a princess too one day, who doesn't?".

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