

Out of Africa

Sonja Sanders and Ernest Wells, Jr. explored the heritage of their African ancestors to create a wedding ceremony filled with music, dance, and joy.

by Andrea Dawn Clark



the broom' was a slavery custom, we didn't feel it was right for us. So I went back farther in history to find African wedding customs."

With the help of Father Donald Sterling, a Catholic priest who has visited Africa many times, and the book *The African-American Wedding Manual* (House of Knowledge, \$15)

by Rev. Willie S. Wilson, Sonja discovered more than just marriage customs, she discovered her roots.

"In many African societies drums and dance are used to announce special events," explains Sonja. With this in mind Sonja hired Sankofa, an African dance and musical group, to play drums and perform a Senegalese dance routine. Meanwhile the couple worked with Father Sterling to blend African traditions into a Catholic nuptial Mass.

"Every time I came up with an unconventional idea I looked over at Father Sterling, and he'd say, 'Don't worry, I'll let you know if you cross any lines,'" says Sonja. He even helped intertwine The 12 Symbols of Life (items significant in African traditions, such as a shield, spear, herbs, and honey) into the ceremony.





African-inspired touches—jewel-toned kente cloth on the reception tables, guests wearing traditional African clothing, and gold accents (in Africa, gold signifies something precious and rare) on Sonja's wedding gown—made the wedding theme come together.

Since Ernest proposed alongside a lake, the couple thought it only fitting that they wed near water. So, on October 12, 1996 at Saint Andrew by the Bay Chapel in Annapolis, Maryland, the musicians of Sankofa began their wedding drum call. "The drum call asks the ancestors if we may start the ceremony," says Kibibi Ajanku, Sankofa's executive director. Then in traditional African fashion, a prayer was said in memory of the couple's ancestors. After this, the wedding party processional began, followed by a performance of the *llamba*—a Senegalese dance used during family transitions—down the aisle and up to the altar. "The *llamba* is a slow, somber, reverent dance," explains Ajanku, "denoting the seriousness of the oath the couple will pledge to each other." Next, Sonja's father escorted her to her groom as an old African-American spiritual played. Once they reached the altar, Father Sterling

introduced The 12 Symbols of Life to the guests and the couple exchanged their vows. After Ernest and Sonja were officially declared husband and wife, a celebratory drum call began and the dancers performed the *mandiani*—a fast-paced, joyous dance. "Our wedding was exactly what we wanted," says Sonja, "a celebration of our African ancestry and the love we have for each other." ■

OPPOSITE PAGE, LEFT: The newlyweds. **RIGHT:** The 12 Symbols of Life displayed on a table near the altar. **THIS PAGE, RIGHT:** The wedding party posed on the banks of the Chesapeake Bay.

