

Description of a Traditional Uzbek Wedding in Arslanbob, Kyrgyzstan by Nadine Boller, Hayat Tarikov, Roma Tohtarov, Sardor Ergashev, Lachin Sadiev, Babur Mamarasulov and Almaz Mamarizaev

Weddings are a central ritual in life across Central Asia. The following article describes a wedding in the ethnically Uzbek, religiously conservative village of Arslanbob, which is nestled in the world's largest walnut forest in the hills above Jalal-Abad in Kyrgyzstan. The article emerged in 2012 from a meeting between six local representatives of Community Based



Uzbek girl prepares for the wedding Credit: Nadine Boller

Nearly all Uzbek marriages are arranged. When a boy reaches the age of 18, his entire family starts to look for a suitable girl for him. The girl's family has to be from the same social class as the boy's. Once a suitable partner has been found, the grandfathers of the couple to-be discuss the matter over a plate of *plov* (a traditional rice dish), and hopefully come to an agreement concerning the alliance between their families. The families' elders, however, do not make the decision alone. All the family members – except for the future bride herself – are asked to communicate their opinions regarding the match, the wedding date, and the dowry. The girl is expected to silently accept the fate that has been chosen for her.

Once the match has been approved by their family the boy and the girl need to get acquainted with each other. They arrange to meet at night. The girl only informs her mother about the boy's arrival, as her father would not allow it. At midnight, the boy sets out for the girl's house with expensive presents (chocolates and perfumes with the value of about ten dollars) to meet her in private behind the house. He first gives her his gifts and then is expected to talk to her in a very polite and respectful manner. If he does not, she will refuse their marriage. The aim of this meeting is to get to know each other on a superficial basis, in order to detect possible problems in advance that might endanger their marriage later on. After the meeting, the boy goes back home and tells his family whether or not the girl is to his liking. The girl does the same, but only talks about it with her mother. If either of them is unhappy with the union, their family will take their opinion into account and accept the fact that they will have to look for a different marriage partner. Such "midnight rendezvous" take place several times before the wedding and each time the boy is obliged to bring presents.

Ten days before the wedding, the parents of both sides start preparing for the party. The shopping list includes many meters of colorful material (the more glitter it has, the better) to make clothes for the bride and blankets for the wedding night, 30 kilos of rice, 30 liters of oil, 40 kilos of carrots, and a live male sheep for making 200 portions of *plov*. In addition enough flour to bake 1000 loaves of bread is purchased.

The day before the wedding, the groom, his best friend, the local mullah and the engagement witness – usually an older man who already has a family – set out to the girl's house after sunset. When they enter the house, the girl is in an adjacent room and kept well out of sight. However she is allowed to invite some female friends and relatives to keep her company during the ritual. The door separating the couple is propped open so that the women can hear the men's conversations. Now the actual engagement begins: the mullah puts a cup of sacred water in front of the boy and recites prayers from the Koran. Then he addresses the girl, who is still listening on the other side of the door, and asks her three times if she wants to marry the boy. Some girls answer after the first time of asking, but most of them only have the courage to reply after the second or third time. Then the mullah directs the same question at the groom, also three times.

The boys usually answers the first time. Now they are officially engaged. To finish the ritual, the boy first drinks a sip from the cup of sacred water and then passes it to the girl, who also drinks it. A blessing by the mullah concludes the engagement.

If you wish to attend an Uzbek wedding you need to be flexible, as the families inform their guests only one day before the wedding itself. They do this by sending young men door-to-door to invite some 200 guests personally. At 9 o'clock the guests arrive for the *Hadma* – the first part of the lengthy wedding ceremony. During *Hadma* the men and women remain separated – the men in the garden and the women inside the house. A mullah prays for the couple's good fortune. The guests who came for the *Hadma* leave after the prayers.

After this the groom and about 25 male friends take trucks and cars and return to the girl's house. Meanwhile the bride has been moved to another house, often the neighbour's, so that the groom cannot see her. Once the whole male group arrives at her home, the family boils a sheep and serves it to them. After the meal, the male relatives of the bride present the groom with a myriad of different clothes for any situation imaginable, from summer sportswear to winter pajamas. The last item that the groom receives is a traditional Uzbek costume which he immediately puts on. Some of the clothes he receives are also meant for his closest friends. The rest of the party are offered cloth handkerchiefs and belts.

Everybody leaves the room except for the groom himself and two of his married friends. Then the bride is ushered in by old women, followed by her female friends. Her face is covered by a veil and she is crying and protesting against the marriage. This is all for show. The female relatives of the girl put two blankets on the ground. The groom sits on one and the bride kneels before him. The groom now lifts the bride up, whilst remaining seated himself, and sets her down next to him on the blanket, symbolizing the bride's transfer from one family to the other.

After this, the men including the groom leave the room. A few minutes later the girl says goodbye to her parents and is escorted out of the room by the older women, who bring her to the groom's house by car. The younger relatives of the bride also accompany her in the vehicle. When she arrives at the groom's house, he lifts her out of the car and carries her into the house. The women have already prepared a room for the bride: they have divided the space in two with a curtain, put a variety of blankets in it and furnished it with objects specially bought for the occasion. The groom brings his bride into the room, which is crammed full of women and children, and sets her down on a blanket behind the curtain. He then leaves her and disappears into a different room where he exchanges his traditional Uzbek costume for a tuxedo. The only traditional item of clothing that he keeps on is his embroidered felt hat. Meanwhile, his friends have laid a long table in the garden and hung up a carpet behind it with the words "Welcome to our wedding" written on it.

In the bride's room, a different tradition is taking place called *Jus ashte*, literally translated as "open face." First, the children from the groom's side of the family receive a long traditional bread stick and proceed to tie handkerchiefs, cloth belts and scarves to it. They then hold it in front of the bride's face like a curtain and lift it up to reveal her face.

After this, the *Jaksalde* ceremony, which means “to put the butter in the hand,” begins. A few older relatives from the groom’s family join the bride. They place a mound of flour, a heap of butter and some *plov* on the ground in front of her. The bride then forms a cup with her hands and the old people, in turns, each put first some flour in it, then hold her wrists and shake her hands so that the flour falls to the floor. They repeat this procedure with the butter and the *plov*, but instead of letting them fall to the ground they catch them with a large plate. In the end the butter and the *plov* are mixed together and all the members participating in the *Jaksalde* tradition eat a small portion for good luck. The symbolism of the *Jaksalde* is that the bride will use her hands to provide food for her future family.

The next ceremony is called *Jochlande*, which means “present”. Before the wedding a man who is older than the couple is chosen. He will be the so-called “godfather”. His job is to support the couple. This is meant in all possible senses: he is the person they will ask for advice in life or when they have problems. He is also the person who will console the couple in case of an argument. He is expected to spend about 20’000 soms (about \$400) on presents, usually kitchen utensils, a television, a DVD player and other electronics. In the *Jochlande* ceremony, the godfather and his wife are the first to enter the room. They give the presents to the bride and congratulate her. Then they also receive presents from the both of the mothers of the couple, preferably equaling the same amount of money as the godfather has spent. Today the younger generations try to avoid being godfathers, as it is considered a waste of money, and often the godfathers do not fulfill their duties.

As soon as night has begun to fall the wedding master of ceremonies takes the microphone and welcomes the guests to the party. He invites the young couple to come out and join the festivities. The groom enters the bride’s room with plastic flowers and then tries to step on her foot. The bride copies his action. This tradition has no name but is essential, as it defines who is going to be the dominant partner, and who will be the more submissive one in the marriage. They then leave the house and walk together around the dance-floor three times. They do this in order to advertise themselves.

The couple then sit at the head of the table while one girl sings *Kelen Salam*, which means “the bride welcomes everyone”. When the music starts the friends of the groom are called to the dance floor – some participating more enthusiastically in this tradition than others. After a few songs, it is the bride’s friends turn to take over the dancing. The people standing around the dance floor give money to the dancers. Food is served again – unsurprisingly it is *plov*– but only for the guests sitting at the table. The last dance is reserved for the groom’s parents, bringing the wedding to an end.

The young couple then retreat to a specially prepared room where the women have heaped 10 to 20 blankets on top of each other, creating a bed. There is a table with some tea, jam, butter and bread, which the couple can enjoy whilst getting to know each other during their wedding night. While drinking tea the groom traditionally gives the bride a watch as a present. If the groom is from a richer family he also offers her a ring. The watch symbolises her one-year obligation of cleaning and housekeeping for the groom’s family. From that day on she is expected to get up at 6 o’clock to complete her domestics duties.

Earlier, during the *Jochlande* ceremony, the bride’s mother chose two experienced women from her own family, who have the task of looking after the the bride and help her engage in a sexual relationship by passing on their knowledge to her. They are also the ones who have to prove the bride’s virginity by presenting her parents with the blood-stained white sheet. The bride’s parents, in return, give the two women dresses as a gesture of thanks. More religious couples wait three days before sleeping with each other. The less religious ones make the first night *the* night.

This article emerged from an encounter, in 2012, between six local villagers working for Community Based Tourism Kyrgyzstan (CBT) and their Western guest, Nadine Boller. At the time, Nadine was teaching English to local children and tourist guides while researching