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THE TRADITIONAL MARRIAGE RITUAL “NIKOH” IN TWO TAJIK FAMILIES

“*Nikoh*” is an important traditional ceremony in Muslim matrimony that takes place before the new family is blessed by God. This ceremony is an Islamic ritual. *Nikoh* is derived from the Arabic word “nakaha” and it implies tying the lives of a man and a woman. In all Muslim families *Nikoh* runs in accordance with the prescriptions written in the Holy Book Qur’an (one entire “sura – an-Nisa” is devoted to the theme of marriage). This formal procedure has historical roots, forming during the Islam expansion in the seventh and eighth centuries, and continues today despite the globalization process introducing changes to religious rituals in contemporary Islamic societies. Most Muslims still follow the rules and customs of their ancestors, while at times skipping some antiquated views and devotions. But it is worth mentioning that despite belonging to one religion, different peoples have different interpretations and ways of setting up the marriage ceremony, including the *Nikoh* ritual, even in a single country. In this paper I will examine the differences in the *Nikoh* ritual between different regions in Tajikistan. The article specifically discusses some religious aspects of the only Islamic marriage ritual *Nikoh*, which usually attracts foreigners because of its specificities and strong restrictions of close sexual relations before marriage. My paper mostly focuses on the main differences and peculiarities between Southern Tajik *Nikoh* and Eastern (Pamiri) one.

Tajikistan is a mountainous country (93 percent of the lands are covered by hills and mountains) located in Central Asia – the region in Asia with the richest natural resources. To the north the country borders on Kyrgyzstan, to the south Afghanistan, to the west Uzbekistan and China to the east. Hence, Tajikistan has common historical and traditional similarities with its neighboring countries. Tajikistan is one of the former United Soviet Socialist Republics, and gained its sovereignty for the first time in September, 1991. In fact, due to its small population, between 1925 and 1929, after the removal of the last Bukhara ruler, Amir Olimkhon, Tajikistan was incorporated as part of the Uzbek Soviet Socialist Republic. In 1929 it was integrated into the Soviet Union as the Tajik Soviet Socialist Republic, with the population of Khujand enlarging its total area to 143,100 square kilometers. Nowadays Tajikistan is an independent, law-based and democratic state with the president at the helm. But it still re-

spects and follows Islam's injunctions and orders, including those in relation to the marriage ceremony. There are different types of *Nikoh* procedures, as well as different types of weddings conducted in the South, North, and East (Pamir) of Tajikistan.

In contemporary times we frequently face the case wherein newly-formed families break up before having come into their full existence. After gaining independence, compared to the Soviet times, Tajik youth have changed their interests. Currently, their ambitions have been replaced by early marriage and, at the same time, by immediate divorce, which is considered a primary step on the path to social degradation. In Islam the common life of a male and a woman starts from the very day when *Nikoh* is conducted.

To better explain and give a full description of the issue, I observed two ways of *Nikoh* conducting in Tajik families: a Southern wedding, and a Pamiri wedding. As an example of a southern wedding I observed my brother's marriage in 2005, which I compare to my grandmother's of the late 1940s, both measured up to the Pamiri type of marriage. I mainly focus here on the procedure, ways and manners of our religious marriage ritual.

My brother married at the age of 28, when his wife was 25. This is not typical in our society, since the youth usually get married between 20-22 years of age for men, and 18-20 years of age for women (when they are not yet "spoiled"). This marriage age limit is lower in rural places. Our family belongs to the customs and traditions of central part of Tajikistan, which is very close to the South. My parents do not compel us to marry a person whom we do not know. My elder sisters have found their husbands themselves and married them out of love.

My brother, however, could not find any likely partner and asked my mother to find one for him. In fact, most of the weddings in Central Asian families are held with the wishes of the parents, who traditionally find their children's partner. The children in this case have to obey their parents' choice and accept the partner proposed by their Elders, who are experienced and wise enough to make a right selection. In reality my younger sister proposed to introduce her friend to my brother. Upon meeting they realized that they had formerly worked together. Later on they decided to get married. My grandmother, in contrast, did not have any experience with men before her marriage, since it was the custom at that time that girls were not allowed to be in one room with a man, nor stay next to a man. Nowadays the situation has changed significantly. The most vivid aspects of my grandmother's story were the specificities of conducting *Nikoh* in pre-Soviet times (1900s-1920s), which mostly differs from how the ritual is conducted today. The marital obligations from the early to mid-1900s were very strong.

My grandmother got married in the late 1940s. At that time, before the *Nikoh* ritual had been performed, a woman had no right to look at her future husband’s face. Men used to see the women by stealth, in order not to give her a sign of her being selected. The same occurred with my grandmother when my grandfather saw her behind the wall, sitting with her female friends, knitting “*sheroz*”¹ for “*ezor*.”² Two days later, my grandfather with his matchmakers came to my grandma’s house and asked her parents’ permission for marriage. A day later they conducted *Nikoh* – the official religious ritual of the bride and bridegroom’s marriage with the presence of the “*mullo*” (Muslim cleric). Only after completing this procedure could the married couple announce themselves as “wife” and “husband” and demonstrate it to the public by calling the neighbors and friends to the wedding “*tuy, oshi palov*.”³

With regards to the contemporary style of wedding ceremony, upon their decision to live together, two young people fix the date when the man’s parents come to the woman’s family to express their, and their son’s willingness to marry their daughter. If they agree to the marriage, both families have a long talk about their activities, business, and relatives, sharing information about their son’s and daughter’s affairs. It is also worth noting that families from one region usually try to keep this marriage link within their own communities. Most parents are against their son marrying any girl from another region, even if she lives in the capital. From this day on the girl is considered to be engaged. Further, the two families set a date for *Nikoh*, which is held two to three days before the registration date, and “*Ruzi Tuy*.”⁴ *Nikoh* is traditionally conducted at the bride’s house with no more than eight people present. There are usually four to five people (bridegroom, his father, uncle and a couple of his close friends) accompanying the fiancé, usually in the evening, to the bride’s house. Only the close relatives of both sides are informed about the day and time of *Nikoh*. This protects the bride and groom from their enemies’ envy, and their aspiration to disrupt the life of this new couple.⁵

After arriving at the bride’s house, the bridegroom and his representatives will be placed in a room separately from the bride. They are not permitted to see each other. After a time the *mullo* comes to the bridegroom

1. Specially figured and designed piece of material fastened to the underneath of “*ezor*.”

2. Particularly wide trousers for women.

3. Traditional Tajik meal, usually cooked on the occasion of official, traditional and religious ceremonies.

4. Day of a Grand Public Party.

5. Elders say that if the foes know the date and time, they would cross their fingers at the moment the *Nikoh* ritual is performed, wishing to see the new family’s life destroyed; therefore, everyone present at the ceremony is asked to expose their hands and legs.

and begins reading “*fotiha*” (marriage prayer), after which he asks the bridegroom if he agrees to get married. When the answer is positive, he proceeds with the ceremony and goes to the room where the bride and her “*vakil*” (bride’s witness) are waiting. The *vakil* announces to the mullo and to a witness from the bridegroom’s side, who accompanies the mullo to the bride’s room, the bride’s wish to marry or not.

The mullo once again reads the same *fotiha* to the bride to get her response. Here my grandmother has told me how the brides in pre-Soviet times were hesitating with an answer, on occasions until the next morning in order to check the bridegroom’s patience. Another interesting moment of getting married in the early-1900s was the case when the brides and bridegrooms had no idea of each others’ appearance. They used to agree to get married according to what the parents said, and their wish and willingness to marry their children only to one whom they consider to be apt for their son or daughter. The children had no right to contradict the parents’ choice, so that the children could see each other only on the day of wedding when they are left alone for the bride-night. There were plenty of cases when the bride having seen the “unattractive” appearance of her husband (or vice versa) used to burn or kill her or himself. It also was not unusual, on the day before *Nikoh*, for the bridegroom’s mother and aunts to visit the bride’s house to observe the bride’s body to make sure that she had no imperfection or illness.

As soon as the mullo receives the bride’s agreement to marry the bridegroom and devote her body to the future husband from her witnesses, he returns to the bridegroom’s room. In some situations the bride can be asked three times to marry her fiancé. While she speculates, the mullo, with the bridegroom’s *shohid* (witness), goes to him and asks for bride-money and other presents for his wife’s parents and relatives (which have been expressed by her *vakil*), in exchange for the bride’s agreement to marriage. Once the mullo gets the bride’s last and final reply to marry, he begins the procedure of reading the final *du’o-fotiha*.⁶ He narrates special words over a bowl of sweet water, “*obi Nikoh*,” that is drunk first by the bridegroom, and then by his spouse, after which the mullo officially proclaims the bride and bridegroom as wife and husband – as one inseparable family.

As for the second matrimony, the Pamiri one differs from the previous one in terms of dress and style of bride’s cloth; a female *vakil* from the bride’s side does not let the bride stray one step from her, sitting with a long stick, thus protecting the bride from the mullo and the bridegroom’s *shohid*, who usually try to make her agree to the marriage quickly, if possible. As distinct from the southern *Nikoh*, Pamiri’s date of *Nikoh* is known

6. Last reading from “Koran” to confirm the validity of their marriage before God.

to everyone who wishes to partake at the ceremony. Moreover, instead of the sweet water of *obi Nikoh*, Pamiri parents put into the bowl pieces of meat and bread and mix them with oil, which does not exist in the southern style of the *Nikoh* ritual. Moreover, when the bride and bridegroom are announced as wife and husband, elder people place a huge, newly-baked bread into the blend of oil and sugar, from which the bride and her friends should break off a piece, moisten it in the mixture, and eat it, wishing to get married soon after their friend. Young girls usually scratch the bride’s neck so as to be the next to marry.

Regarding the issues of sex, love and respect between the newly married couple, at all Muslim weddings, sexual relations between the bride and bridegroom are strictly forbidden until they officially register themselves in front of God. In traditional families, newly married young people do not know each other, have never met before, which correspondingly conveys of no love existing between them. In some cases, only respect can be observed in their attitudes towards each other. But mostly, even this significant element of their interaction fails in those families that have been created by the initiative of the parents. “But these are our customs and traditions,” emphasize the Elders, and they “distinguish us from other nationalities and religions.”

The last important difference between Southern and Pamiri marriage is that, for the former, divorce is carried out by the husband announcing three times the traditional phrase called “*Taloq*” to his wife in the presence of *shohid* (the same as while conducting *Nikoh*). In contrast, a Pamiri family skips such formalities and do not oblige themselves to go through any religious process to be divorced. Pamiri people usually marry at the age of 25-28 or even older, when they are wise enough. This helps explain the remarkable low rate of divorce between Pamirians compared to the other parts of Tajikistan, where a third of newly formed families break down because of their parents’ unwise advice, and their willingness to divorce their child over minor, everyday family disputes that occur between the husband and his wife.

At the end of my observations I came up with the three fundamental and essential moments in Tajik marriage rituals:

- *Nikoh* is the holiest and the most imperative religious procedure that takes place in human life. Such issues as love, sex, mutual respect and devotion have nothing in common with society, but rather come out from each family’s persuasions (mostly husbands as a head of hearth and home).
- Women, according to our communities’ views, but not according to the Koran, can perform *Nikoh* only once in their life and only with one man.

- The society controls the interaction between the wife and the husband through involving a mullo in their relations, when any serious problem arises in the family, since the mullo serves as God's representative and interprets their misunderstandings for them, unless *Nikoh* between them is broken. The divorce in the family should not serve as a pattern for others, therefore the mullo has to prevent such circumstances and help put the couple on the path to repentance and becoming once more a family.

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