

**MAX PLANCK INSTITUTE FOR  
SOCIAL ANTHROPOLOGY  
WORKING PAPERS**



MAX-PLANCK-GESELLSCHAFT

Working Paper No.28

**LALE YALÇIN-  
HECKMANN**

**THE POLITICAL  
ECONOMY OF AN  
AZERI WEDDING**

Halle / Saale 2001  
ISSN 1615-4568

Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology, P.O. Box 110351,  
06107 Halle / Saale, Phone: +49 (0)345 2927-0, Fax: +49 (0)345 2927-402,  
<http://www.eth.mpg.de>, e-mail: [workingpaper@eth.mpg.de](mailto:workingpaper@eth.mpg.de)

## The political economy of an Azeri wedding

*Lale Yalçın-Heckmann*<sup>1</sup>

### Abstract

This paper looks at the significance and political economy of Azerbaijani weddings using a case study of different stages of marriage negotiations, wedding preparations and dowry exchange. Postsocialist Azerbaijan is characterized by unemployment and money shortage, thus the enormous expense of wedding parties and marriage payments are striking. Unlike in former times of secure jobs and steady incomes, the expectations of taking part in conspicuous consumption may mean taking out large loans and activating and spreading one's social networks across kin, neighbours and friends. The case study shows how social inequalities and hierarchies among family members and kin may take new forms and be challenged throughout the various stages of the preparations for wedding parties. Moreover wife-takers and wife-givers try to use the payments and the wedding arrangements for redefining their mutual status positions. The transfer of property and its symbolic meaning therefore not only contributes to the establishment and shaping of wife-giver and wife-taker families, it also has ramifications for inner familiar hierarchies and gender roles.

---

<sup>1</sup> Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology, P.O. Box 110351, 06017 Halle/Saale, Germany, Tel: +49 (0)345-2927 226, Fax: +49 (0)345-2927 502, email: [yalcin@eth.mpg.de](mailto:yalcin@eth.mpg.de)

This paper is based on eight months fieldwork in Azerbaijan Republic from 2000 to 2001. The research deals with property systems in rural postsocialist Azerbaijan. I would like to thank John Eidson, Chris Hann and Alexander King who read and commented various versions of the paper. I am naturally responsible for its shortcomings.

## **Introduction: Weddings and the Azeris**

At the beginning of my stay in Baku, I was meeting experts on agricultural economics and Azeri politics, and I needed an Azeri-English dictionary written in the Cyrillic alphabet to help me read the daily papers and documents I was collecting. A bookshop was recommended to me as a likely place to find this dictionary, which has a rather limited distribution. This bookshop specialises in governmental and official publications. When I first went to the bookshop, it was closed during lunchtime, so I decided to come back in the afternoon. Arriving after three pm, however, I found it still closed, without any further notice on the door. As I was trying to find someone to ask, a beggar outside the bookshop addressed me in Russian, the usual language used by and for Baku urbanites, assuming from my looks that I must be a Russian speaker. Replying in Azerbaijani, I asked when the bookshop was going to be open. He replied that the shop was closed all day as all the personnel had gone to a *toy*, a wedding.

People used weddings as legitimate excuses for missing work and being absent from university or governmental jobs. During an interview with the secretary of the governor in Ismayilli rayon (district) about the applications of the Land Reform, the man showed me a fancy invitation he had received for a wedding of a former colleague's son. The wedding was to be held in Baku, and the proud father had invited all the governor's apparatus from Ismayilli as well as prominent politicians and ministers in the capital. The secretary was sure that for at least two days all the senior local bureaucrats would be absent from the rayon. He resented the fact that the wedding was not going to be held in the town of Ismayilli; his local patriotism more than his concern for days lost travelling to Baku was the cause for his resentment. So he hoped, that his former colleague would hold the wedding of his second son in his native town of Ismayilli.

Weddings in Azerbaijan are not only sociable occasions for young and old, providing entertainment and enjoyment; they equally involve detailed economic calculations and exchange relations. These days weddings are accompanied and 'immortalised' in a very comprehensive videotape film of almost all stages of the wedding proceedings. These videotapes are primarily for private use. They could, however, also become a commercial commodity. The weddings of politically or socially prominent people and so-called 'high society' are usually public events, where popular singers are engaged to sing. The video recordings of these weddings are sometimes sold on the market and in shops, where the

singers display their talents performing the most popular Azeri songs. My research assistant Ragib in Baku supplements his meagre income in this business. He has a badly paid position as an ethnographer and historian in the Academy of Sciences, and has an extra job at the private company of his friend. This is a business that organises weddings in wedding halls and popular restaurants in Baku. The company is named ‘*Savab*’ (religious good deed, merit) and is run as a humanitarian agency (*hümanitar cemiyeti*)<sup>2</sup> for tax purposes. Ragib and his friend provide advice to their customers on the offers of various wedding halls and restaurants, comparing their prices, program, food and music. In Baku the average cost of such a wedding party in the wedding halls or restaurants was \$10 per person in the year 2000. If famous singers are to be invited to the wedding, the costs will normally go up, but the singers may agree to get their royalties from the sale of the wedding videos. Remembering that in Azerbaijan the average income per capita at the time was ca. \$40 a month, the magnitude of wedding expenses becomes clear.<sup>3</sup>

The aim of this paper is to focus particularly on the economic transactions that characterize weddings in Azerbaijan and to explore to what degree social and economic activities around such a life-cycle ceremony may be seen to indicate changes in the notions of economic transactions, involving the exchange of money, gifts, labour and property. Furthermore how different orientations of various social groups towards kinship, the state, money and the market become articulated during marriage negotiations, preparations and weddings will be explored. One of the hypotheses of this paper is that monetary transactions (through borrowing and lending currency), which may have been usual in the past during the wedding preparations, have gained more significance due to currency shortages and increased dependence on labour exchange. The analysis is based on a case study of transactions and politico-economic relations involving the marriage of two sons of my Azerbaijani host family in Cavankend.<sup>4</sup> Evidently, it is stronger in showing the multivocality in the meaning of money and market transactions, through its focus on

---

<sup>2</sup> In Azerbaijani ‘ü’ is pronounced like the German ‘ü’; ‘c’ is like ‘j’ of ‘jam’ in English; ‘ç’ is like German ‘tsch’ as in ‘deutsch’.

<sup>3</sup> The World Bank World Development Report 1999/2000 cites average household income in Baku in 1993 to be \$977. This was less than 1/30th of an average household income (AHI) in Melbourne, Australia, less than 1/5th of AHI in Budapest, Hungary and less than 1/4th of AHI in Moscow, Russia in 1993, (see World Bank 2000: 220-221). The World Bank defines average household income for urban centres as “the average of household incomes by quintile. Household income is income of all household members from all sources, including wages, pensions or benefits, business earnings, rents, and the value of any business or subsistence products consumed (for example, foodstuffs)” (Ibid., p.215) The same source gives GNP per capita as \$490 for Azerbaijan in 1998 (Ibid., p.230).

<sup>4</sup> All names of places and people have been changed.

different perspectives, interests and actions, than stating some overall generalization concerning the contemporary Azerbaijani society.

*Azerbaijan: the political and economic background*

The Republic of Azerbaijan declared its independence from the Soviet Union in 1991. The transition to this new statehood has been marked by ethnic and national conflicts of varying scales which began before the establishment of the new republic, continuing and escalating into a war in the mid-1990s. The conflict over the status of the Nagorno-Karabagh Autonomous Oblast (NKAO), which began during the last years of the Soviet Union, burst into a full-fledged war between the Armenians and Azeris from Armenia, Azerbaijan and the NKAO. This primarily internal and later international military conflict is still not resolved but only ‘frozen’; a peace settlement has not been reached even if the ceasefire has been kept fairly consistently since 1994. Hence the economic changes which other former Soviet countries have been going through have been aggravated by war, and by the occupation of nearly one fifth of Azerbaijan’s territory by Armenia, and by the displacement of about 800,000 people.<sup>5</sup> Political and economic policies concerning the countryside have been shaped within this tense climate of external threats and unresolved conflicts, accompanied by internal political instability. The Azeri government was taken over by a bloodless coup in 1993, and the present political leadership has been struggling for political legitimacy, even though its political rivals seem to be weak and ill-organised.<sup>6</sup>

To this background of tension over the last decade in Azerbaijan, one needs to add the economic and political dependency and uncertainty resulting from the geopolitical positioning of Azerbaijan vis-à-vis Russia and other neighbouring states and West European powers, due to its oil and gas reserves in the Caspian Sea. Moreover, Azerbaijan is dependent on Russia because of the labour migration of over one million Azeri citizens currently living there. Although the presence of this large population in Russia is not limited to the postsocialist era, its implications for Azerbaijan have changed.<sup>7</sup> The Azerbaijani government is dependent on the continuation of the economic activities of this large population abroad, even though it officially displays a rather laissez-faire attitude,

---

<sup>5</sup> See *Statistical Yearbook of Azerbaijan 2001*, Baku, Table 2.20, p.66

<sup>6</sup> For accounts of the internal political tensions and developments, see Goltz, (1998), Swietochowski (1995) and van der Leeuw (2000).

<sup>7</sup> Caroline Humphrey (1999:39-40) indicates, for instance, that Azerbaijani traders and entrepreneurs have been among the well-established trading minorities in Southeast Siberia for a long time.

seemingly not to control the economic life of the Azeri citizens there directly. On the other hand, the existence of the Azeri labourers in Russia is an asset for bargaining in the political relations between Russia and Azerbaijan. Threats of introducing visa requirements for those entering or working in Russia are enough to cause deep anxieties among the Azeri population in Russia as well as their dependent families in Azerbaijan.<sup>8</sup>

In contrast to this bleak picture of the country, which is grappling with unemployment and demonetisations in this so-called transition economy,<sup>9</sup> one may ask how real these economic difficulties are when one observes the boundless excitement about and the enormous expenses and the financial burden involved in wedding ceremonies, which seem to be shared by almost all levels of the society. Anthropological accounts have extensively explored the central role that wedding ceremonies play in people's lives and how they often involve large expenses. Weddings mark the culmination of a range of activities involved in establishing a marriage alliance. Weddings also seal the marriage negotiations and legitimise the marriage union.<sup>10</sup> Seen here as a series of activities ranging from preparations, the actual ceremonies and the post-ceremonial activities, they involve numerous economic transactions which serve to bring forth and contest various oppositions in social relations between people, e.g. between those who are socially 'close' - kin, neighbours, workmates and friends. The expected participation in work, preparations, gift giving and entertainment is indicative of these processes of defining and redefining social relationships. They are central public occasions for marking individual and life-cycle status changes for men and women. Marriage ceremonies provide a bundle of ritual symbols on which individuals and groups can draw in order to shape their relations with one another; hence a good deal of creative work and power relations are involved in these configurations. Changes in wedding ceremonies and customs have been seen as indicators of changes in gender roles, domestic life and notions of family as well as revealing attitudes towards and implicit notions about nationhood and statehood. Lindisfarne (forthcoming) for instance, explores weddings in a small town in Turkey, showing how

---

<sup>8</sup> See Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty report "Russia: Moscow still seen as a threat to stability in South Caucasia" by Jean-Christophe Peuch, 05.01.01, <http://www.rferl.org/nca/features/2000/12/13122000182954.asp>

<sup>9</sup> For the process and types of demonetisation in Russia, see Dutta 2000: 21-33.

<sup>10</sup> Without the wedding a marriage may exist for some years, but may not be socially recognised. Such was a wedding I attended in the neighbourhood, where the young woman had eloped with a man, against the wishes of her family. She came back and reconciled after a year, having had a small baby, and her family held a wedding party for her, which was also called a *toy*, but specified further on as a reconciliation wedding party (*barışiq toyu*).

forms of classifying them as ‘modern’, ‘traditional’ or something else may be seen to indicate ways and degrees of self-identification with Turkey’s modernisation project. Weddings are, however, significant occasions not only for enacting social status and social relations but also for engaging in financial activities. They usually involve very substantial financial transactions in addition to the re-arrangement of property relations and inheritance within a property-holding kinship group and between wife-givers and wife-takers. That financial and property transactions are part and parcel of marriage arrangements, and articulated in the symbolic language of weddings, has also been extensively discussed in the anthropological theoretical and ethnographic literature, in reference, for instance, to Africa and the Middle East (Goody 1983, Peters 1990, Bates 1974, Maher 1974, Mundy 1995), but also by Soviet ethnographers in reference to central Asian peoples (Annaklychev 1984[1965], Borozna 1984[1969]).

### **What happens at a wedding**

In the following I describe a ‘double wedding’ in the household where I stayed in Cavankend which took place during my stay and for which the preparations were most intensive within the first months I spent in this small town. It was the wedding of two brothers, marrying their fiancées from different backgrounds and families.

#### *Ethnographic background*

The family of the wife-takers, the Qamberov family, lives in Cavankend, a small town with a population of ca. 7,000. Cavankend had a *sovkhos* and a *kolkhoz*, producing mainly grapes and, until the mid-1980s, cotton. In recent years the *sovkhos* and the wine factory as well as the *kolkhoz* have all been involved in some form of dissolution process, which is not yet fully completed. Currently the only institutions where employment is still provided are the gas depot (*neft bazası*) and the two elementary schools. Könül Qamberov, the mother, is 63 and teaches Russian at one of the schools to pupils between the 6<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> grades. Her hours of teaching have been reduced due to the changes in the language policy of state schools, where fewer hours of Russian are now being taught. Her salary therefore has not only been devalued due to the change to the new national currency, but also because of the reduction in teaching hours. She now earns 210,000 manat (ca. \$46) a month. Her husband, Hesən Qamberov, is 64 and works at the state gas depot as an accountant. His salary is

about 200,000 manat (ca. \$45). They have two sons, Saleh and Aydın, aged 26 and 23 respectively. The elder son, Saleh, attended school for 10 years, the legal minimum, and is unemployed. Due to the Armenian-Azeri war over NKAO Saleh served five years in the military and received a war veteran's certificate at the end. His younger brother Aydın has finished the Agricultural Technical College in Ganja, the second largest city in Azerbaijan. He served in the military, too, but he has been unemployed since then. Therefore, he has decided to go and look for employment in Moscow, where his maternal uncle (*dayı*) has been living for a long time and where his fiancée's kin have also moved in order to find work. Thus, he has chosen one of the most common strategies of labour out-migration, like many other young men in Azerbaijan, especially from these rayons. Aydın has been working at the vegetable markets in Moscow, in wholesale business of vegetables and fruit, mostly trying to secure some sort of permanent job.

Saleh's fiancée, Latife, is 23 and a primary school teacher. She lives in a suburb of Ganja, about 30 km away from Cavankend. She has a large and fairly wealthy family; her father is a shop-owner, selling tires; her mother is a housewife with a technical college education. Saleh and Latife met when Saleh was working temporarily in a shop, owned by the son of a neighbour in Cavankend, which was next to the shop of Latife's father. They had a brief period of courting, about 3-4 months, before Saleh decided to ask his mother to ask for her hand.

Aydın's fiancée, Nalan, is 23, too, and a school friend of his from the technical college. She lives in the city of Ganja. After finishing college, Aydın urged his mother to ask for her hand. Könlü resisted Aydın's pleading for a while, after finding out through her friends and relatives in the city about Nalan's family background (more on this later.) She could not, however, bear her son's unhappiness and insistence, especially after her elder son, Saleh, interceded on Aydın's behalf. The two families arranged for a small engagement party, which took place before Aydın left for Moscow in 1999. (Aydın, being the more outgoing one of the two brothers, decided to leave for work abroad, like many other young men of his age.) Nalan followed Aydın to Moscow, and they have been seeing much of one another, as Nalan's brother, together with their mother and the brother's wife, all started living there when the brother decided to look for a job in the Moscow markets.

### *Preparations for the wedding*

The initial phase of the wedding preparation involved the negotiations between the wife-givers and the wife-takers about the date of the wedding. The date was first set for the wedding of the younger son, Aydın. Because he had been engaged for a year, it was thought proper that he should get married first. When I visited the family in March 2000, Könül hinted that her younger son was going to get married in autumn. This plan for a single wedding was changed, however, to a double wedding upon considering of the family's social, individual and financial situation. *Firstly*, Könül and Hesên were uneasy about breaking the custom by having the younger son married before the elder one. By March the elder son, Saleh, had not yet expressed his desire to ask for the hand of Latife. But when he told his mother that he 'found the girl he wants to marry', 'everything went quite fast', as Könül recalled. The visit which Könül made alone in order to get to know Latife's family 'became', to her surprise, a visit asking for the hand of the girl (*söz kesme*) and setting the date of engagement for a few days after her very first visit to the family. Hence, the *second* reason for having Saleh's wedding shortly after his engagement was so as to take the wish of the young couple and of Latife's family into consideration. This also resolved the problem of age rank between the brothers. *Thirdly*, Saleh's wedding and, hence, the establishment of an affinal relation with Latife's family was seen as opening up a chance for him to be employed in the tire-shop of his future father-in-law. Könül thought that this chance was being hinted at when Latife's father asked for Saleh's veteran's identity card: he needed the identity card in order to transfer the ownership of his shop to his future son-in-law, Saleh. This transfer of ownership was taken by Könül as a sign of the father's intention to employ Saleh and not as a 'real change of ownership'; the father explained this change as being financially more profitable, since veterans do not have to pay any tax on their commercial small enterprises. *Fourthly*, the wedding was to become a double wedding because it meant saving on the expenses. Despite the social criticism from those who heard about the double wedding, that marrying two sons at the same time is against customs (*adat*), Könül and Hesên's arguments found some acceptance: the most legitimate argument was the long period of engagement of the younger son, Aydın, and not wanting to break the rule of marrying the elder son before the younger one, hence a compromise with tradition. Financial arguments could not be publicly declared as legitimate, although everyone knew that holding two different weddings with equally large numbers of guests would have been more expensive than holding a double wedding. Hence

the double wedding was publicly legitimised as the wish of both sons: The costs were said to be immense for a double wedding, thus diverting attention from the fact that one would also be saving on the expenses. Instead the imminent costs of having to make double payments of gifts was mentioned as a considerable burden.

After deciding that the approximate date of the double wedding would be sometime in late October, the wife-takers, basically Könül and Hesən and their elder son Saleh, were busy thinking and gathering information about how to proceed. The actual date of the wedding could not be set until they knew the definite date of arrival of Aydın from Moscow. Before his arrival though, the real preparations began only with the cash remittance of \$1000, which Aydın sent with a trustworthy Azeri person from Moscow. The money arrived approximately two to three weeks before the actual wedding. Upon the arrival of this sum Könül, Hesən and Saleh intensified their information gathering activities, i.e. finding out about prices and quality of animals to be slaughtered for the food or to be given as presents to the wife-givers, finding out about the cost of musicians, cooks and chauffeurs to be employed for the ceremonies. Prices were compared between Cavankend and Ganja; normal standards were those from Cavankend, from the successful weddings of friends, neighbours and relatives. Aydın's school friends from Ganja were contacted to provide good quality musicians at friendship prices. Könül mobilized her neighbours and friends to organise various stages of the cooking: Bread for app. 150 guests needed to be baked. At least three or four types of dishes were to be cooked, and in addition, *kebab* had to be prepared by hired cooks, who were to be paid a day's wage.

Könül did not start spending the money however until she heard what the wife-giver families were demanding as '*başlıq*' (bride-price). This was a diffuse term used for all the payments and gifts the wife-giver family would demand from the wife-taker family. This was unclear until the return of Nalan and her mother from Moscow, which was about ten days before the actual wedding. Aydın himself arrived after them, only a week before the first wedding party, i.e. before Latife's *qız toyu*.

The particularities of this period of preparations in terms of the articulation of notions of money, labour and gifts being exchanged and principles of hierarchy, equality and delayed or immediate exchange being activated could be described as follows:

1. Money (currency) was a scarce resource and was collective property within the family.

One relied first on the money earned by the members of the household and wanted to

avoid lending or borrowing from others. (They had to borrow money later on, however.)

2. The moral meaning of money was ambivalent: This was possible due to the lack of knowledge about the conditions of earning money in Russia. Könül and Hesên were not keen to find out how Aydın managed to send them such a large sum of money. Doubts and anxieties about the source of this money were, however, latent and became articulated much later.<sup>11</sup>
3. Another aspect of accepting the money sent by the youngest son without many questions was the powerlessness felt by the parents, due to the fact that **they** could not finance the wedding with their own means and resources. So there was a shift in power between the generations, as is felt by many families in Azerbaijan, who send their young men and sons to work abroad and survive largely on their remittances.
4. Similarly the elder brother had to give up his rank position to the younger one, as he was financially completely dependent on his parents and could contribute no cash to the wedding costs.
5. Money sent by Aydın was initially accepted as a ‘gift’ by his parents and his elder brother. The gift was a pay-back in the system of delayed exchange: the general understanding was, that the younger son was earning money and helping his parents and brother back home, hence paying back his family for the sacrifice of having sent him away and financed his education to begin with. No one seriously questioned its amount or source. The money, however, was to be employed collectively for the wedding payments and the wedding expenses incurred by both of the brothers. It needed to be converted into a cash resource to be spent in equal terms for both of the brothers. All the expenses for both of the brides had to match one another. The conversion of the dollars took place by buying Azerbaijani currency with a part of it. Control of the money and the final word about its expenditure lay with the sons’ mother, Könül.

---

<sup>11</sup> Ledeneva (1998) speaks of the strategy of ‘misrecognition’ of *blat* in Russia’s economy of favours. She defines *blat* as “the use of personal networks and informal contacts to obtain goods and services in short supply and to find a way around formal procedures” (p.1). In Azerbaijan the local term for using such personal networks is to ‘have one’s man somewhere’ (*adamı olmaq*). I refer here, however, to the ambivalence which was caused through the ‘misrecognition’ of favoritism, that is, of accepting a large sum of money without being sure or clear about its source. That such ambivalences were common in Soviet times does not necessarily negate the fact that people are nevertheless concerned with morality, i.e. with moral ways of earning money. In Könül’s case this ambivalence was reflected in their unease and reluctance to discover about the source of money.

6. The tensions building up over coping with the challenge to the hierarchies of generational and sibling rank order were contained within the family and postponed until Aydın came from Moscow. Until then, there were no substantial demands for payment and gifts from the wife-givers.

*Negotiations with the wife-givers*

The negotiations with the wife-givers over the terms and types of payments to be made to them and over the payments towards the costs of holding the ‘bride’s wedding’ party (*qız toyu*) were initiated by Nalan’s family upon her mother’s arrival from Moscow. On the whole, ‘bride’s wedding’ (*qız toyu*) is the wedding party organised by the wife-givers, especially the parents of the bride, to say farewell to their daughter. The bride’s wedding is given great importance especially by the wife-givers, in order to demonstrate and challenge the wife-taker’s superior position. Hence the bride’s wedding party is almost as big and expensive as the final one, the groom’s wedding party (*oğlan toyu*). On the last day of wedding parties, the bride is ‘brought in’ (*gelin getirmek*) to the groom’s household and the groom’s wedding party marks the culmination of the marriage ceremonies. In this special case of the double wedding in Cavankend, there were two ‘bride’s weddings’, one for Latife and one for Nalan, both of which had to be coordinated with one another and with the groom’s wedding party.

So, at quite short notice, Könül and Hesên were ordered to come and discuss the arrangements. I joined in the party of negotiators upon Könül and Hesên’s request, to act as an instance of ‘control’ and ‘pressure’ as an ‘honourable guest from abroad’ thus guarding against the possible extravagant demands of the wife-giver families. The first visit was to Nalan’s family in the city. The family, despite the short notice they gave, had prepared a lavish tea table, the young daughter-in-law (*gelin*) of the family had baked a huge and fancy cake, which one often associates with delicatessen pastry shops in Moscow. All the sweets and chocolate came from Moscow. Nalan was present only briefly; the talk and negotiations were held in a formal and elaborate language, which was stressful for both sides. Könül and Hesên (who is in fact notorious for his sweet tooth and passion for rich cakes) did not touch the sweet food, and drank only a cup of tea. He told me afterwards, that he just did not feel at ease enough to eat the offered food.

The pressing issue for Könül was to find out how much money and/or other payments the parents were going to demand. First, there were formal, polite, introductory words,

emphasizing the young couple's long wait, and expressing the wish that they had made their choice and with Allah's blessing would be happy all their lives. Then Könül described Aydın's tight timetable, saying that he would come only for a week from his job in Moscow and had to go back immediately in order not to pay extra fees for his place at the vegetable market. Therefore, all the wedding dates, i.e. the 'bride's wedding(s)' and the final grooms' wedding had to follow shortly upon one another. Since Aydın worked in Moscow and hoped to earn enough money to open up a business in Ganja sometime, he could not set up his house yet. Könül said that, among the two sons, the elder one was in fact entitled to the better flat, the flat in the city of Ganja, which Könül had inherited from her father. However, since Aydın was keen on finding a job in the city and was more likely to do so than his brother, Könül and Hesen had decided to swap the property between the two sons, who had agreed to it. The elder son was to get the house in Cavankend, which is smaller (and was still inhabited by Könül and Hesen) and the parents would move to a single room across the living court (*heyet*). Aydın's future flat in the city needed some renovations and would be ready when they were able to invest some more money in it. Therefore, if and when Nalan wanted to 'bring in dowry' (*çehiz getirmek*), she should wait until the flat in Ganja was renovated and Aydın had saved enough to return from Moscow. Könül added that the family of Latife had indicated their wish to bring a large 'dowry'. Könül said, she did not want anything, as she had all the furniture the young couple would need, and there was no room anyway.

All this reference to the bride's dowry and furniture and having no room was tactical talk Könül had to bring up, in order to have counter arguments to any possible high demands for payments from Nalan's parents. These points were indeed relevant for Nalan's father. He began his speech, indicating how hard the times were and that young people especially were in a difficult position as they were almost all unemployed. Out of his sympathy for the hardships Aydın faced, the father said, he was prepared to have his daughter marry without 'taking out her dowry' (*çehizi evden çıxarmadan*), although this was certainly not the custom. His description was literally true; the flat where Nalan's parents lived in Ganja, had received the dowry of their only daughter-in-law, and had the furniture of her mother as well as hoarding Nalan's dowry. (Nalan's father had to stay behind in Ganja and protect the property, when his wife, son and daughter had all gone to Moscow.) The dowry had to consist of exactly or at least as many goods and pieces as Nalan's elder sister had, said Nalan's mother. Nalan's mother, who is clearly the dominant person in the family, had a

less diplomatic strategy. She was aiming more at putting Könül and Hesen under pressure. She said she was ashamed that her daughter was getting married without being able to take her dowry out (and of course display and show it off to her own friends and relatives and to her future in-laws); Nalan was feeling very uneasy about this situation too. So, they were going to give a wedding party for her in a 'suitable' wedding hall. Nalan's mother had asked around, where families like theirs celebrate the weddings; only one place could be considered. It was a newly renovated wedding hall, costing \$10 per person everything inclusive. They were reckoning with 100 guests, including the guests from the wife-takers' side. She, therefore, asked Könül to contribute to these costs of their '*qız toyu*'. Könül was probably expected to contribute at least half of the costs; but she gathered all her courage and said, they could give only \$300. Hesen hardly joined in the discussion, directing his comments more to Nalan's father. Almost in a weak voice, he recalled how 'in the Soviet times' all the ceremonies took place jointly; there was no separate *qız toyu* and *oğlan toyu*.<sup>12</sup> Nalan's father tried to soften the tone by disagreeing with his wife. He suggested that they hold the wedding in the same hall where they had held their elder daughter's wedding. Nalan's mother would not step back, however: 'everyone is doing their wedding there' (*hamı orda toy eyleyir*), meaning the new and expensive hall. The discussion did not go on. Nalan's parents agreed to the amount Könül was prepared to give, and Könül, who had brought the dollars along with her already, paid them the money immediately.

The next visit on the same evening was to Latife's family, to discuss arrangements, dates and payments with her parents. This visit occurred in a totally different atmosphere. First, Saleh came along, as he had done to Nalan's family, too; again, he did not stay in the house. After saying his greetings he went outside, as the codes of modesty required. Latife's parents were not alone; Latife's father had two other male visitors, his close business colleagues, with whom he had in fact been drinking and who took part fully in the negotiations. In Latife's house we were all received with large amounts of food, with many of her relatives helping out and trays of food, tea, fruit following one after the other. Könül and Hesen were received with great enthusiasm: in fact, an almost embarrassingly exaggerated enthusiasm, the exaggeration probably due to the drunkenness of the father. Latife's father used very flattering and honouring language, praising the high education of

---

<sup>12</sup> This is a partial truth, referring more to the time when Hesen got married himself. Hesen did otherwise hold wedding parties for his younger sisters in their parental home. In the 1970s and 1980s separate wedding parties, with lots of guests seem to have been the normal procedure.

Könül, Hesen's status as *seyid*,<sup>13</sup> addressing him never with his name but only as *seyid*, and repeating many times, how delighted he was and that they were to become affines (*qohum*) with such a family. He emphasized over and over again that he wanted nothing from Saleh's parents for his daughter, no payments and no '*başlıq*'. He would give a big wedding party for his daughter, and Könül and Hesen should only tell him how many guests were to be expected at Latife's '*qız toyu*'. After pressing this point many times and adding his compliments to Könül and Hesen and to myself, he let us leave, satisfied that 40 guests from the wife-takers' side would be coming to their *qız toyu*.

During the negotiations among the wife-takers and wife-givers, various tensions were laid open. Some of these were probably due to structural inequalities between the wife-givers and wife-takers. Wife-takers are seen as having a structurally higher position per se.<sup>14</sup> As Hesen and Könül were discussing the payments they had to make to Nalan's parents, expressing their despair at the high sum demanded and the additional gifts they had to give to her family and close kin, Hesen's sister's husband, Zeynel, reassured Hesen and Könül that they should not let themselves be blackmailed and put under pressure by the girl's side (*qız terefi*). Nalan's parents were the ones who had to worry about a possible breakdown of the wedding preparations and even of a refusal to marry their daughter. 'It is now too late for them' (*artıq çox gec*) he said. The notions of gendered identities, of male and female codes of honour and shame, and gendered notions of marriage union with special emphasis on virginity, which are similar to those found in many countries of the Middle East, were being referred to here. More specifically, a young woman's association with and engagement to a young man has an effect on her marriage chances and 'value' - based on her chastity and reputation - in the 'marriage market'. Hence, this structural advantage of being the wife-takers would ideally allow the wife-takers to play the dominant role in marriage negotiations, where demands are set and challenged. This structural advantage is not absolute, however. The struggle for equal status between the wife-giver and wife-taker families is equally an integral part of marriage alliances. The family of the

---

<sup>13</sup> *Seyid* is a term used for those who are allegedly descended from the Prophet Muhammed's family and there are many such *seyid* families in all over the Middle East and Central Asia.

<sup>14</sup> The general discussion of marriage patterns in many Middle Eastern societies indicate structural inequalities between wife-takers and wife-givers. In the Azeri case, similar to the Turkish case discussed by Meeker (1976), wife-takers are seen to have a superior position per se, due to the fact that they are 'gaining a bride' into the household and the wife-giver family is losing a member out. This superiority is often acted out in the wedding ceremonies and has to be kept under 'control' for a successful wedding. These similarities to other Middle Eastern societies are topics which can be further explored, an endeavour which is beyond the scope of this paper.

wife-givers attempts to make up for its structural disadvantages by employing certain strategies during the bride's wedding party and the delivery of dowry. This struggle is best articulated in the size, manner, and way of organising the bride's wedding party on the one hand, and the payment and delivery of dowry (*çehiz*) on the other, which I will look at below.

### **The transfer of goods and things: marriage payments in action**

After settling the dates for the wedding parties and the major payments to be made, the next stage of wedding preparations involved the bringing in of Latife's dowry. Two days after the negotiation visits to both of the wife-giver families, Latife's dowry arrived on a truck accompanied by her paternal great uncle's wife, another woman to help with the arrangements, a carpenter and a driver. All day long, around six young men, all friends of Saleh, helped to carry the dowry inside. Könül and Hesên were left out of the whole procedure; Hesên because as a man, he would not be expected to interfere in the matters of the women, Könül because she wanted to explicitly give the unspoken message to the wife-giver family that the bride was going to be in charge of the new house and Könül was not going to interfere in her life. From the wife-givers' party, the uncle's wife, who is an elderly and portly woman and one of the eldest of that family, took charge of the situation and told the men where to put the furniture. It was she who decided how and where the existing furniture in Könül and Hesên's household was to be placed. Some of it was taken outside, some moved to less visible corners. The principle of arranging the dowry in the husband's house was to secure its visibility and predominance in comparison to any old or new furniture already in use. When I commented on this rather rude method of discarding old furniture as if in a jumble sale, other women, neighbours and friends of Könül who had come to help with the cooking for the guests, i.e. the dowry bringers, found the rather disapproving tone in my question inappropriate. Of course, the dowry of the new bride, **her** *çehiz* should be seen as the first thing, when one enters the room; the new should supersede the old. The more new things, the better. Könül was said to have the problem of not being able to transfer this property; if she had had a daughter, she could have given some of the china and other household goods to her daughter as dowry and hence made room for the dowry of the future daughter-in-law. The single room, where Könül and Hesên were to spend the rest of their lives was found to be too small and

inappropriate to their status. Könül shared my disapproving attitude and explained to me that she did not find this method of being almost ‘run-over’ by the dowry-bringers pleasant. She told how she was bossed about by the old woman, who was determined to put the cupboard from the dowry in such a place in the bedroom, that although it was certainly visible, one could hardly open the door. Könül had kept herself in the background, out of courtesy and to signal her acceptance of the new bride, but her politeness was rebuked by a complete rejection of her interference with the arrangements. She jokingly commented that Latife’s father must have chosen this old woman to lead this dowry delivery, just to scare Könül and Hesen.

This feeling of superseding the family of wife-takers and hence subverting their structurally weak position as wife-givers was definitely the dominant message in the actions of the dowry bringers and their successive visits to Hesen’s and Könül’s household. Latife’s father had used an exaggeratedly flattering language, praising Hesen, Könül and Saleh, but he was now using his wealth and large kinship group to correct the inequality in the affinal relations. In the next two days following the delivery of the dowry, the two and a half rooms, which were to be inhabited by the young couple, Saleh and Latife, were almost flooded by visitors from Latife’s kin group, all women, who came to arrange the dowry and decorate the furniture and the rooms. One day they came and hung various carpets on the walls, explaining that they were gifts from Latife’s father’s brothers, and mother’s brothers, to her dowry. On the next day a few women came, this time to change the placement of the carpets, arguing that a particular mother’s brother, whose carpet was put on the ground would be offended if it were not hung on the wall!

As Latife’s dowry was being brought in and arranged, Könül was busy hosting the guests with food and offering them all the help they needed. Her closest neighbours and colleagues, all non-kin, were also helping out. Moreover the guests and visitors who came to arrange the dowry all went away with minor gifts, such as pairs of socks, scarves or clothing material. Könül and Hesen’s concern at this stage was also to watch out for and secure the equal treatment of both of the brides. Könül declared immediately as the bedroom and living room were being arranged, that Aydın and Nalan were to get the bed room for the time they spent as guests in their house. They were expected to leave for Moscow some days after the final wedding party. Latife’s women relatives found this arrangement acceptable, even if unusual. Normally, the marrying couple, whose house it is and whose *çehiz* was brought in, should spend the first night in their own bed room and

not another couple. Könül, however, made a special point of putting the special bed sheets and laundry, which Nalan's mother had given, into the bedroom.

During this stage of dowry bringing and movement of property and goods, hierarchies among wife-givers, wife-takers and the two brothers were being strongly challenged. The wife-givers made symbolic gestures of showing off their wealth, expressed in terms of concern and love for Latife, their close kin, niece and daughter. The numbers of close kin who came were also a sign of extensive and active kinship ties, that is as a resource of power. Latife has many relatives, who care for her and come to help her when needed; this was in fact a point of contestation during the negotiation visit to Latife's family. Latife's father, in his exaggerated style, had offered to send as many *qulluqçu* (servants) as Könül would need for the wedding preparations. Könül and Hesên do not have large kinship networks; Hesên has two sisters, with whom he is on good terms and in close contact. His brothers' households however are either physically or socially distant from him. Könül is a 'stranger' in Cavankend; she is originally from Ganja from a rather well educated and urban family, and came to Cavankend to work as a teacher and settled there after marrying Hesên. Her parents are dead and her distant relatives are in Ganja and are hardly employable as 'practical kin' in Bourdieu's sense. So Könül's answer to this rather challenging offer, which had an air of condescension to it, was to admit her poverty in kin relations, but to emphasize the wealth of her social relations, her many extremely helpful friends and neighbours (*yaxın adamım yox, amma yaxşı qonşularım var*). She built up all these relations, using her own social competence and showing respectable behaviour all these years at work and in her neighbourhood, she said.

Finally, Saleh's supposedly superior status as elder brother, challenged by Aydın's success and wealth, was validated by his bride's impressive dowry. It was Saleh's bride Latife's dowry, which was being brought in large amounts, as a visible sign of wealth. He visibly gained in self-confidence and 'face' in front of his parents and his brother for having found such a generous family as future affines.

#### *The drama of the wedding dress*

Aydın arrived from Moscow a day before the delivery of Latife's dowry. Despite his horrendous journey by train, during which he was nearly robbed of all his money and belongings, he was soon confronted with his parents' and Saleh's questions: where were the two wedding dresses which Aydın had promised to bring from Moscow? During one

of his recent telephone calls, he had declared that he would be bringing the wedding dresses for both Nalan and Latife. The wedding dress in Azerbaijan is very much after the European fashion, white with lace and fancy details. The important point here was that the dresses had to look alike, (if not the same,) and they had to be of equal quality and beauty. The story Aydın had to tell raised much anxiety and concern: When his fiancée Nalan had been shopping with her sister in Moscow, she had seen a very beautiful but very expensive wedding dress. Seeing her admiration for the dress, her elder sister had laughed at her and said: ‘Your fiancé can hardly buy himself a pair of underpants, how is he going to afford such a dress?’ Nalan told Aydın of this conversation and he, feeling provoked and injured by his future sister-in-law’s comment, swore to buy the dress, which cost \$300. Afterwards, he said, he had no more money to buy the other dress for Latife, his sister-in-law to be. When Saleh and the others saw the dress for Nalan, Aydın had brought along, Saleh was deeply disappointed: There was no way, they could find and afford a similarly pretty and extravagant dress for Latife here, he said. During the next days, as all the activities around the dowry, guests, shopping and wedding preparations were taking place, one of the crucial issues to be resolved was how to find a compatible wedding dress for Latife. Having caused this inequality between the brothers, Aydın’s esteem within the family, despite the fact that he had actually sent most of the money to finance the double wedding, was at a very low level. He tried to use his contacts in Moscow to make up for the mistake: Maybe some friends of his could find the particular pearls and beads which were applied to the upper part of Nalan’s dress and one could sew them on a rented dress here in Azerbaijan, he suggested. After this hope was dashed because the friends were not yet coming, he took on the responsibility of finding a similar dress to rent in Ganja. Time was running short, and Latife’s mother and aunts were asking about the dress from Moscow. In the end, Saleh did not have the courage to admit to Latife that there was no dress from Moscow. He said the dress was coming and brought her the hired dress, which was fairly similar and of a similar quality and sophisticated cut. Even if his lie was never admitted openly, Latife must have understood, when after the last day of wedding parties, she had to give the dress back to Saleh, who said, in a rather insensitive tone and without any further explanation that he had to take the dress back to Ganja. The drama of the dress caused Aydın to be put under much pressure from his parents: they, and especially Könül wanted to dictate, **when** Nalan should be wearing her dress from Moscow, as there were in fact three wedding parties. The first party was Latife’s *qız toyu*; after that came Nalan’s

*qız toyu*, to be followed by the grooms' party, *oğlan toyu*. Könül insisted that Aydın tell Nalan to wear this dress only on the final day, when Latife's dress would be ready, i.e. hired for one day only. The brides were asked to wear white or red for their respective wedding parties and then only white for the final one.

One might wonder why such details of colour and ornamentation, or about where and when certain clothes should be worn, were so relevant and time consuming for the Qamberov family. The discussion about the dress and its complications was primarily a family affair; but being a steady guest and already accepted as 'part of the family', I had the privilege to take part in this discussion and to hear their different perspectives and worries. What were the underlying concerns behind all this detail? One concern was obviously financial constraints. If they had been able to afford to buy another dress of the same quality, either in Ganja or Baku, probably the matter would have been settled without any fuss. More important, however, were the concerns of Könül though less so of Hesên, who was somehow fed up with all this fuss and was blocking any further constructive solution, to maintain equality during the wedding ceremonies: between the brothers and between the brides. It was common knowledge that details of wedding parties could become an asset for gaining or losing respect and honour in society. Könül wanted absolutely to avoid any malicious comments about the brides, their presents, their attire and appearance. Könül's final concern was her future relations to her in-laws. Nalan's family was *nouveau riche*, she told me; they had made money through *al-vercılık* (petty trade), and especially her mother was constantly bragging about the amount of dollars she spent for this or that household good and luxury item. Worse than that, according to Könül, they had Aydın under their control: He was alone in Moscow and was already spending (i.e. before the wedding) all his time with Nalan's family. Könül suspected that they were going 'to squeeze him like a lemon' and would not let him save a penny.<sup>15</sup> The struggle for social recognition and for the maintenance of one's own social position, which was implicit in what may look like obsession with details, became publicly visible in the course of the wedding parties.

---

<sup>15</sup> A year after the wedding, her fears have become true; Aydın has been hardly able to save any money as he has to take part in the expenses of his affinal family and relatives.

## The wedding parties

The brides' wedding parties (*qız toyu*), which are held by the families of the wife-givers, had similar structural features, including wife-takers bringing in trays full of gifts and henna for the bride and her family members, the women of the wife-takers' party dancing with the trays in their hands as they entered the house of the bride. The wife-takers are 'guests' of the 'owners', i.e. the hosts of the wedding party, who were the fathers of the brides. I shall not go into the details of symbols of gender difference, emphasizing female purity and chastity related to her virginity, as well as the symbols which are more connected to Azeri and Muslim culture, such as sacrificing a sheep or a rooster, where again the colour of red, of blood and of henna, was omnipresent. However, I would like to point out a fundamental difference between the pattern of the brides' wedding parties and of the groom's wedding party: The brides' wedding parties were symbolic displays of status contestations between the wife-givers and wife-takers. The groom's wedding party, however, primarily entailed rituals of passage, of liminal borders and incorporation, hence addressing the processes of separating and of incorporating the bride from her parental family to her new family, very much fitting the ritual patterns, as discussed by van Gennep nearly a century ago and developed by Turner (1969). The aspects of these wedding parties which I would like to explore briefly are related to their articulations of social class and of ideas of economic values versus social values. First, I will turn to a general and comparative description of the brides' parties (*qız toyu*).

Latife's party was held in her parental house, outdoors in the courtyard of their fairly large and newly renovated house. The courtyard is covered with a tin roof, which is not ornamented as lavishly as in some *nouveau riche* households today, but which still offers a large open space, protected from the weather. The guests of the wife-givers' side included relatives, friends, neighbours of Latife's family as well as colleagues from her school and the guests of the wife-takers' family; altogether amounting to nearly 200 people. Tables were set up and decorated with food and drinks. In general men and women sat separately as did the guests of the wife-giver and wife-taker families. In Latife's wedding party, the young men of the wife-taker family dominated the dances in terms of the time and length of dancing, the vigour of young men's dance figures, and the joy and self-confidence being displayed. In particular, Aydın played the leading role, inviting his young male friends, and the women of the wife-takers' group, to come out for

dances. He was, in fact, almost competing with the officially hired ‘master of the ceremonies’ in weddings, the *tamada*,<sup>16</sup> who announces the events, songs, introduces the musicians, makes speeches to mark the ‘meaning of the day’ and invites honourable guests to deliver speeches or read poems in honour of the marrying couple and the ‘owners’ of the wedding party. Due to his position as Saleh’s brother, Aydın had the role of leading the younger generation of the wife-taker party. The dances expressed the implicit notions of men as winners and conquerors, and, thus, reflected, once again, the structural superiority of the wife-takers. The domination of the wife-takers in dances, however, had to be controlled by the wife-givers, and this was done through the mediation of the *tamada*, who repeatedly invited the men and women of the wife-givers to dance and wish the new couple well. Aydın and his friends, however, commented afterwards that they thoroughly enjoyed themselves and the dancing and were convinced that they were the more skilful and elegant dancers.

The presentation of wealth and generosity in Latife’s wedding was under her father’s control and responsibility. He was constantly surveying the procedure of the wedding party and ordering young men, helpers of the wife-giver family, to provide tables with enough alcoholic drinks (vodka, for men only, women were not offered any alcoholic beverages) and fresh trays of food, various sorts of meat dishes and ample dishes of vegetables and fruit. Another item on display was money: Banknotes of 10,000 Manat, one *şirvan* (ca. \$2), were being given as gifts to the dancers, who danced with the paper money in their hand for a while and then passed them on as tips to the musicians.<sup>17</sup> The visibility of money during the wedding party was striking; small children were dancing with banknotes in their hands, Könül, Aydın and Hesen were expected to give cash as gifts to the cooks, the photographer and to the *tamada*. The power of this visibility of money during the wedding party was embedded in its absence and shortage in everyday

---

<sup>16</sup> *Tamada* (тамада) is a Russian word, meaning toast-master of ceremonies. The Azerbaijani usage of the word refer specifically to the role of a person hired for such wedding ceremonies, and not to some informal and self-appointed toast-master.

<sup>17</sup> The musicians’ pay usually takes into account the amount of tips they are expected to receive during a wedding. The owner of the wedding party therefore has to watch out that the band gets enough money in tips; this is one of the reasons why Latife’s father was giving a *şirvan* (10,000 manat) each to his honourable guests. Being ignorant of this custom of transferring the banknotes to the musicians, I made the foolish and funny mistake of dancing with the money for a while and then accepting it as a ‘personal gift’ for my dancing ability: at the end of the dance I simply put it in my pocket and walked away with it. When I told this to Könül, she burst into laughter over my innocent assumption; she advised me to do the same at the next bride’s wedding and so raise some money for the final party! A *şirvan* is one twentieth of her salary, it should be remembered.

life today and of course in relation to the socialist period.<sup>18</sup> In a way money was, in contrast to its everyday absence, being re-appropriated in order to be circulated for reputation and honour. Moreover it was under the control of the wife-givers: Their demonstration of generosity and abundance was geared to re-claim their status as being superior to that of the wife-takers. The wife-takers were only symbolically dominating the party and hence ‘acting’ their structurally superior position.

The next wedding party, Nalan’s *qız toyu*, had a similar structural pattern, but could not have been more different in its general mood and atmosphere. The difference lay, first, in the rural character of Latife’s party which was in contrast to the urban character of Nalan’s party. Secondly, Nalan’s party was organised commercially instead of relying on kin and friendship networks as in Latife’s case. In one way this contrast was dictated by the commercial organisation, hence the commercial taste and style of the party. This represented, however, a conscious choice of the wife-givers’ family, Nalan’s parents and relatives. Nalan’s mother and her maternal aunts – not her male relatives - were very much present during this ceremony as organisers and hosts. Nalan’s father was in the background. In general, commercial organisations of wedding parties give the *tamada* a very dominant role. In Nalan’s party the *tamada* hardly ever took a break, used the microphone constantly in order to invite the musicians to play more of the popular songs, with their two soloist singers and very powerful loudspeakers. He invited more the wife-givers’ guests than the wife-takers to make speeches, lead dances and make their good wishes to the couples. Nalan, wearing her dress from Moscow, and absolutely the centre of attention, was placed on a slightly raised platform, sitting together with Aydın at a table at one end of the large hall. The seating arrangement fit the standards of commercially organised city weddings: The marrying couple were to sit separately and higher to one side, and the guests were divided among separate tables, each table seating about 10 to 12 people. In contrast, the village or rural weddings have tables that are arranged in long rows. Könül intervened immediately with the seating arrangement for the couple, as there were only two seats and one table for the couple, despite the fact that the whole wedding was a double wedding. She ordered waiters to put another table and two chairs for Saleh

---

<sup>18</sup> In many wedding videos I watched in Azerbaijan, showering dancers, honourable guests, the bride and the groom with money was common practice. In the early post-socialist period, when many from the northern rayons were able to earn lots of money through the sale of alcohol in black markets in Russia, dollar notes were being thrown around. These days dollars are rather rare and Azerbaijani *şirvans* are more common.

and Latife, the same way that Saleh and Latife had shared their table with Aydın and Nalan at Latife's *qız toyu*. Equality between the brothers and the brides was restored again by Könül; Nalan's family had tried to stage the whole wedding party as a glorification of Nalan and the superior social class of her family, articulated here as the superiority of urban weddings and tastes over rural ones.<sup>19</sup>

The wife-taker side in Nalan's wedding party was strikingly docile if not intimidated. Saleh did lead some of the dances, but he does not share his younger brother's outgoing personality or his dancing skills. Aydın, in total contrast to his former role in his brother's bride's party, was expected to show modesty and restraint in his behaviour. This was his wedding party, i.e. he, like Nalan, was at the centre of attention. Other young men of the wife-takers party did a good share of the dancing, but not as freely and boisterously as they did at Latife's wedding. Nalan's relatives were doing at least an equal amount of dancing. More importantly, Nalan's relatives were sitting, men and women mixed, drinking together; and when 'western' pop music was being played, they joined Nalan and Aydın's opening dance, dancing also as mixed couples.

The concern for images of wealth and beauty was evident everywhere. Video recording, which is done professionally at all wedding parties and in this case as a double recording, one for the wife-takers and one for the wife-givers, dominated the production of imagery. No detailed action or ritualistic act, such as presenting the couple, Nalan and Aydın, with presents, could be taken without the presence and active instructions of the video-recording man. Since the party was indoors, in a rather dark hall, arranging the lights and situating the people and actions according to optimal filming conditions became the primary concern. Images from the on-going recording were occasionally frozen into still shots of the couple, Aydın and Nalan. The food was, of course, served by waiters and not by friends and relatives as in Latife's wedding; the waiters also played a demonstrative role, imitating the style of other city weddings in modern urban centres of the Middle East and also of Turkey (see Lindisfarne, forthcoming), bringing in presents and decorated food as a gift from the wedding hall owners, all accompanied by a row of lighted torches held by waiters. The relative absence of money, displayed by dancers or given to the

---

<sup>19</sup> Lindisfarne (forthcoming) discusses notions and imaginations of modern versus traditional weddings in Turkey as signifying the self-identification of the people with Turkish republican ideals: modern weddings being less self-indulgent and having mixed sex entertainment. The opposition of rural versus urban weddings in Azerbaijan does not use this language of modern=better, but associates urban with higher social class and more sophistication.

musicians was also striking. This was probably due to a fixed price having been arranged with the hall owners for almost all aspects of the wedding party. Even the photographer was paid in advance and did not have to be tipped. The relative absence of money, especially as gifts to dancers, also seems to suggest that money had become an implicit object, only to be ‘felt’ through the costly goods and commodities on display and for consumption. It was an implicit misrecognition of money; tips had to be hidden from view. The urban soloist singers could not be tipped as directly as the rural ones; the lavish food on the tables including expensive meat sorts and even caviar all signalled high prices without ‘displaying’ the money itself. The aspirations of Nalan’s family for urban upward mobility through trade and petty capitalism could perhaps be understood best in Nalan’s own words, who, during our chat at the very final wedding party in Könül and Hesen’s house, was comparing all the wedding parties. She asked me, whether I did not find **her** wedding party the best: ‘It was very aristocratic’ she said.

Finally, the grooms’ wedding party, *oğlan toyu*. The last wedding party took place two days after Nalan’s party: The first one, Latife’s, was on a Wednesday, the second, Nalan’s, was on Friday and the final one was on Sunday. Saleh and Aydın’s party was to take place outside in the courtyard of their house. The preparations were carried out under fairly chaotic and difficult conditions, since it had rained heavily for the last two days before Sunday. Their young male friends and relatives worked throughout in an amazingly dedicated way. They stayed up with little food and few cups of tea the whole day on Saturday until the early hours of Sunday, setting up the tent and making it rainproof. The terms for providing labour and help were once again not based on payments of money but on delayed exchange between relatives and friends. Those friends, neighbours and relatives who were involved in various aspects of the preparations were all carefully chosen, on the basis of mutual and symbolic labour ‘debts’. One colleague of Könül’s, for instance, who had come to offer her help, although Könül had not sent for her, was, in Könül’s eyes, trying to make up for a former offence. Other participants were also fulfilling their roles as helpers, as they were the ‘close people’ (*yaxın*) of Könül, Hesen, Aydın and Saleh. In return they would expect the same amount of help in gifts, labour and eventually cash for their own wedding celebrations.

Aydın and Saleh’s wedding party started a bit later than expected, as it took longer to pick up both of the brides from their respective homes. From the wife-givers’ sides, there were again conspicuously more guests from Nalan’s side than from Latife’s. Nalan and

Latife were both wearing their white wedding dresses, and they had to go through various rituals of parting, threshold-passing and incorporation into their new families, the details of which will not be discussed here. In this wedding party, the wife-givers played marginal roles; the invited guests, amounting to 150 people, were crowded together under the tent at the long rows of tables. The musicians and the *tamada* were friends of Aydın from the city of Ganja but were definitely less loud and imposing than the band in the wedding hall in Ganja. The brides were taken into the house and sat there the whole time, watching the dances and speeches which took place outside through the video pictures on the TV screen in the living room. They were not invited to come out to dance, as they were at the brides' wedding parties. The connotations of these actions and rituals of threshold-passing for the brides and their being almost captive in the room, as objects of display, but also as guests to be entertained first by their own female relatives and friends who stayed for almost two-thirds of the wedding party, were those of bride capture and possession. Various objects were actually and ritualistically 'stolen' (*oğurlamaq*) from the bride's homes as the brides were being taken out of their homes to be brought to the final wedding party. Nalan's female relatives were trying once again to assert their social class difference by being rude and making mean comments about the missing cutlery on the table or the lack of heating in the room. But the grooms' family did not pay much attention to them. As Zeynel had said earlier, 'it was now too late' for them to complain or dissent; the brides had arrived (*gelin geldi*). The young men of the wife-takers' family danced endlessly and drank without fearing social disapproval. The party lasted nearly seven hours, and before the guests finally left for their homes, they signed their names on a list (*siyahi*), indicating how much money they had paid to the list keeper as their gift to the owners of the wedding. Such lists are kept at all weddings and also at other ceremonies (such as mourning or circumcision), and the particular amount registered serves as a guideline for the exact amount to be given and received in return at the donor's wedding ceremony or on similar ceremonial occasions. After the last guest had gone, the couples retired, being expected to consummate the marriage. The brides had to deliver the evidence of their virginity, the blood-stained sheet, which was taken the same evening to their mothers by the waiting female relatives of the respective bride.

## Concluding remarks

The monetary costs of Saleh's and Aydın's marriage for the Qamberov family, according to my estimates, amounted to nearly \$2000. This sum included the payments and expenses during the preparations, visits, brides' wedding parties and the final grooms' party. The immediate returns and earnings according to the list of payments (*siyahi*) from the final party, was ca. 1,600,000 manat, i.e., \$360. The debits and credits could not be assessed with any further clarity, as they also involve long term cycles of exchange. In this concluding section, I would like to raise some questions posed by the political economy of Azeri weddings and try to provide some explanatory comments on them.

One might ask whether Azerbaijani weddings are an instance of self-indulgent, conspicuous consumption, aimed at forgetting the bleak prospects of an economic future. Gerald Creed (1998: 202-204) refers to the extravagant presentations of gifts during a village wedding in what was, at the time, still socialist Bulgaria and compares this to Kwakiutl potlatching, describing how they were part of informal economic activities of the socialist village economy. Are we seeing a similar phenomenon here, where the 'rational' economic calculation of expenses follows different rules? If the social constraints and 'cultural' guidelines for economic behaviour are detrimental to the household economy, as is evident at least in the short term, why can these constraints not be discarded? To answer these questions I will try to display the underlying logic of Könül's and Hesên's actions.

- Könül and Hesên were (still?) thinking within the framework of an all encompassing and powerful state, which controlled the economy and dictated economic action: they relied on state employment, held at least some of the values of some 'socialist past', such as rejecting excessive or pure consumerism, but they nevertheless felt themselves under pressure from a changing system of values.
- The 'new' values of consumerism were difficult to resist. They could be easily absorbed within the already existing system of aesthetic values; the wish to possess aesthetically highly valued objects (clothes, china, furniture) has existed all along. So Könül, for instance, had taken measures through kin and friends to ensure that she would receive a high quality dowry. Her furniture, which her brother in Moscow had helped to buy and transport to Azerbaijan came from the former GDR. Although the 'new' items of consumption (such as those in Latife's dowry) were no better than the

older objects, the way the new consumer markets pour in the objects is a temptation in itself, which perhaps differentiates the tastes of the younger and older generations.

- Könül's and Hesen's decisions and economic judgements on what they could afford or not were not based solely on their socialist past. They were also concerned about moral values shared by many Muslim societies. Hesen, for instance, refused to drink vodka himself (and was in fact unwilling to offer vodka to guests during the preparatory activities), because he is a *seyid*. He also took the trouble and paid the money to have the Islamic marriage performed by a local *mulla* (Muslim priest). For Könül, reference to her ethnic (on her mother's side, she has Crimean Tatar ancestry) and 'noble' origins<sup>20</sup> - which she probably started doing only after the *perestroika* - were as important to her as her socialist past. She had been a party member, but gave up her membership before the dissolution of the Soviet Union, due to her disappointment with the politicians who did not serve the socialist ideals, she said. She found support in her own biography, having a well-to-do, urban and educated family background, to resist the pressures of the new economic values.

What happens to money in this current 'transition' economy is significant. As discussed above, money was a scarce resource in the everyday life of post-socialist rural Azerbaijan and had the quality of a gift and a commodity for conspicuous consumption during the wedding ceremonies. In order to provide the cash to be spent on such ceremonies, various forms of exchange, barter or borrowing money at high interest were activated. This encourages and increases economic activity and production, on the one hand. But on the other hand, it increases the dependency on foreign markets and economies, such as remittances from Russia.<sup>21</sup> Consequently wedding ceremonies have long-term ramifications for the family budget. People often argued that the reason for their current economically tight budget was the recent wedding of a daughter, son, brother or sister, which they had to finance. Similarly,

---

<sup>20</sup> Könül's Tatar relatives are descended from a wealthy landowning class, who had to flee leaving their property during the second World War. Her relatives in Turkey have done some research on this property and have sent her a picture of the architectural model of the estate owned in Crimea, which she keeps and which she showed to me.

<sup>21</sup> Even if Azerbaijan had been incorporated into the economy of Russia and later on of the Soviet Union for centuries, needless to say, the economic relations in the postsocialist era are set on very different terms than the socialist one.

Könül and Hesen's family had to pay back some of their debts immediately after the wedding and will probably have to keep a very tight budget for some time.<sup>22</sup>

What happens to property in marriage transactions as described in this case study could be summarised as follows: The property in question was primarily movable property, the dowry. Dowry involves the transfer of property within a family and kin group as well as between wife-takers and wife-givers, and beyond, as it involves the contributions in money, labour and kind of friends and colleagues. It therefore mobilizes kinship and social networks, such that close kin define or re-define their kinship tie to the marrying woman through the amount and type of gifts they make to her dowry. Secondly, the transfer of dowry initiates a process of increasing the demand for cash: dowry items are mostly bought goods, hence requiring cash. Thirdly, through the transfer of dowry, terms of delayed property exchange, e.g. terms of inheritance are articulated too. The expenses for dowry and the bride's wedding party (*qız toyu*) are usually referred to as giving the daughter's share of inheritable parental property. Daughters were, on the whole, not cited as receiving any share of the household plot or the parental house; their share was 'paid out' when they got married.

The transfer of immovable property during marriage transactions involves the transfer of houses or apartments for marrying sons. If there is no separate house or flat available, the married couple may move in with the man's parents. The parents are expected to provide, however, separate housing for the married couple sometime after the wedding, either through buying a house or a flat or building one. As this transfer is embedded in the inheritance process, too, the timing of the transfer could be much later, depending on the economic means of the household. In the case of the Qamberov family, the transfer of the city flat to Aydın and Nalan has happened only in principle and the dates for its renovation and for actually moving into it are still open. The Qamberov family had no land, other than the estate on which their house was built, until recently. With the new Land Reform of 1996 the family has been given a small piece of cultivable land, too. How the new Land Reform, which entitles both male and female household members to small parcels of private land, will affect the property inheritance remains to be seen.

---

<sup>22</sup> This applied especially to the money which was lent by 'distant' friends, such as Aydın's work colleagues from Moscow. I heard that it was demanded back the day after the final wedding. The logic is probably that the later one asks for the money back, the less chance one has of getting it back. On the day after the final wedding, the sum collected during the party served as the pool from which to pay back the debts.

## Bibliography

- Annaklychev, Shikhberdy 1984. The wedding ceremonies of the Turkmen workers. In: Dragadze, T. (ed) *Kinship and Marriage in the Soviet Union. Field Studies*. London, Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul, pp.15-39; (originally published in 1965, in: Agadzhanov, S.G. and Oyazov, A. (eds) *Issledovanie po Etnografii Turkmen*. pp.134-63 )
- Bates, Daniel 1974. Normative and alternative systems of marriage among the Yörük of Southeastern Turkey. In: *Anthropological Quarterly* 47 , 270-287
- Borozna, Nella Gregor'evna 1984. Some features of the traditional wedding ceremony of the Uzbek-Durmen of the southern raions of Tadzhikistan and Uzbekistan. In: Dragadze, T. (ed) *Kinship and Marriage in the Soviet Union. Field Studies*. London, Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1984, pp.60-73 (originally published in 1969, in: *Sovetskaya Etnografiya* no.2, pp.80-86 )
- Bourdieu, Pierre 1976. Marriage strategies as strategies of social reproduction. In: Forster, R. and Ranum, O. (eds) *Family and Society. Selections from the Annales*. Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, pp.117-144
- Creed, Gerald W. 1998. *Domesticating Revolution. From Socialist Reform to Ambivalent Transition in a Bulgarian Village*. University Park, Pa.: The Pennsylvania State University Press
- Dutta, Jayasri 2000. Some lasting thing: barter and the value of money. In: Seabright, P. (ed) *The Vanishing Rouble. Barter Networks and Non-monetary Transactions in Post-Soviet Societies*. Cambridge University Press, pp.15-34
- Goltz, Thomas 1998. *Azerbaijan Diary. A Rogue Reporter's Adventures in an Oil-Rich, War-Torn, Post-Socialist Republic*. Armonk, N.Y.: M.E. Sharpe
- Goody, Jack 1983. *The Development of the Family and Marriage in Europe*. Cambridge University Press
- Humphrey, Caroline 1999. Traders, "Disorder," and Citizenship Regimes in Provincial Russia. In: Burawoy, M. and Verdery, K. (eds) *Uncertain Transition. Ethnographies of Change in the Postsocialist World*. Lanham, Boulder, New York, Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield, pp.19-52
- Ledeneva, Alena V. 1998. *Russia's Economy of Favours. Blat, Networking and Informal Exchange*. Cambridge University Press
- Leeuw, Charles van der 2000. *Azerbaijan. A Quest for Identity*. Richmond: Curzon Press
- Lindisfarne, Nancy (forthcoming) *Thank God, We're Secular. Gender, Islam and Turkish Republicanism*. Istanbul: İletişim

- Maher, Vanessa 1974. *Women and Property in Morocco. Their Changing Relation to the Process of Social Stratification in the Middle Atlas*. Cambridge University Press
- Meeker, Michael 1976. Meaning and society in the Near East: examples from the Black Sea Turks and the Levantine Arabs. In: *International Journal of the Middle Eastern Studies*. 7:243-70 (Part I); 383-422 (Part II)
- Mundy, Martha 1995. *Domestic Government. Kinship, Community and Polity in North Yemen*. London, New York: I.B. Tauris
- Peters, Emrys L. 1990. *The Bedouin of Cyrenaica. Studies in Personal and Corporate Power*. (ed.) Goody, Jack and Emmanuel Marx. Cambridge University Press
- Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty 05.01.01. Russia: Moscow still seen as a threat to stability in South Caucasia. By Jean-Christophe Peuch.  
(<http://www.rferl.org/nca/features/12/13122000182954.asp>)
- Statistical Yearbook of Azerbaijan 2001*. State Statistical Committee of Azerbaijan Republic, Baku: Seda
- Swietochowski, Tadeusz 1995. *Russia and Azerbaijan. A Borderland in Transition*. New York: Columbia University Press
- Turner, Victor 1969. *The Ritual Process. Structure and Anti-Structure*. New York: Aldine de Gruyter
- World Bank 2000. *Entering the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. World Development Report 1999/2000*. Washington, New York: Oxford University Press