

V.I.P. ARTICLE SUBMITTED BY:

Damir Aidarkhanov

Professional Science Masters Student - Nanoscale Physics track
Rice University



Wedding Traditions/Customs in Kazakhstan

Historical Background:

Kazakhstan is the Central Asian state, extended from the Altai mountains in the East to the Volga river in the West, and from Siberia plains in the North to Himalayas in the South, with the size of almost four times the size of Texas. Population of the country is 15.6 million people (2008 estimates) and mostly consists of Kazakhs, Russians, Ukrainians, Uzbek, German, Tatar, Uygur, and others¹.

Creating a family and wedding considered to be one of the important moments in the life of two young people. Kazakhstan has rich and long history which constituted the country as being multinational and multi-religious. It experienced its historical periods of heathendom where: 1) people believed in different powers and spirits of the dead, 2) Islam penetrated due to trade and military campaigns, 3) Soviet time, when all religions were suppressed due to the belief that "religion is the opium for masses", and 4) immigration into the country of many nationalities and people occurred. All of those periods had their own effects, and wedding traditions were influenced by them.

However, in general, before Soviets came, marriages were commonly arranged by matchmaking, following exogamic rules, religious norms and other clan/tribal constraints. The exogamous barrier was up to the seventh generation, where everyone should have known all of his or her seven grandfathers. From a religious point of view, Islam allowed Muslims to marry non-believers, if only the latter renounced their faith and accepted Islam as their faith.

Cradle-betrothal, when parents arrange the marriage of the children right after their birth, was also a common practice. Abduction with or without bride's agreement also existed. Moreover, due to military activities and hard life conditions of the nomadic lifestyle, men had low life expectancy. That is why the levirate custom existed, where the brother marries and inherits his deceased brother's wife and children, as well as sororate custom, where the husband marries deceased wife's younger sister. An Islam paradigm also allowed having up to four wives if the man was prosperous enough to take care of all of his wives and children.

Present:

Nowadays, these traditions are history, and marriages are more Western style, where the groom wears a suit and the bride is dressed in a white wedding dress, with all the guests wearing suits and evening dresses. However, are still some procedures and customs worth mention.

Engagement:

The wedding ceremony and traditions come to the scene with the moment when girl accepts a boy's offer of marriage. Before the procedure of engagement, the groom's parents negotiate the amount of "kalyn mal" (pride price), which is the process of determining the number of the bride's close relatives to be given presents. During the ceremony of engagement, the groom's parents put earrings on to the bride. From that moment, the young couple is officially engaged. The groom's party, usually consisting of his parents and close family friends (about 7-8 people), bring "kalyn mal" and valuable presents to the bride's parents, grandparents, brothers and sisters. Historically, the engagement is when groom's parents ask for permission and approval about the marriage of their children from bride's parents. The "kalyn", along with presents, are designed to please the bride's party in order to get their approval.

Pre-Wedding:

Before the general wedding or “toi” (festival, party), there is a tendency for the girl’s party to hold “uzatu toy” or the farewell ceremony, to indicate the moment when bride leaves the parents’ home and starts new life with her husband. Usually it is feasting with some good food and drinks, and at the end of which groom takes the bride to his home before 12 a.m. The way of the bride from her home to the car is covered with white tissue, symbolizing a good and happy road for their future life together.

Upon arriving to groom’s place, the “betahsar” ceremony or “revealing the face” of the bride to groom’s family takes place. During the ceremony traditional songs “zhar-zhar”, “betashar” are sung and accompanied by “dombira”, a two string national music instrument. This is followed by serving food and drinks.

After the bride is brought to groom’s place, the groom’s party usually brings in couple of days the “oltirisi” to bride’s parents. It is meat of a whole sheep or its equivalent that needs to be distributed between close neighbors and friends of the bride’s parents. After some time there is the general or groom’s “toi” (wedding ceremony) that follows.

Wedding:

The main ceremony begins in the morning when friends of the groom and bride start from the home in a procession of cars. They are decorated with colored ribbons and balloons, led by a limousine carrying the bride and groom. They head to the official registration of the wedding with government agency called AHAZH (ZAGS in Russian). There, in the presence of an authorized official, the groom and bride agree on being husband and wife, and exchange rings. This tradition came from Soviet times. In Western cultures, these type of ceremony is usually done in churches. After this official part, they go to Central Mosque, to get approval from Mullah.



Wedding procession in Almaty



City wedding palace (AHAZH-ZAGS)

Then they drive around the city stopping at particularly nice places to take pictures and memorialize the event. In the Almaty usually they stop at the Republic Square, monument to the “28 guardian heroes from Panfilov division” in the park called after them, “Medeo” – an ice stadium in the mountains and some other places.



Sign-in and ring exchange in AHAZH



At the park of 28 Panfilov's division guardians



Ice stadium – Medeo



Wedding procession at Medeo

At the evening around 6-7 p.m. the cortege arrives to the rented restaurant where the rest guests are. Here they can repeat “betashar” for the guests who haven’t seen the original ceremony, and start feasting and having a good time, which includes food and drinks. During this part of the wedding, the couple listens to wishes and congratulations from the guests, starting with the most respected ones such as the grandparents, the bride’s parents, and so forth. Different entertainment is also organized. Popular singers and dance bands are invited. The guests play various games and have competitions in dancing, singing and other fun. At the end of the general toy, several meals and deserts are served. The “toybatar” (party starter) are brought into the room. It is time to give small presents for all the guests present.

The next day bride’s party is invited by the groom’s parents, their close friends, and relatives to the “kydalik”. They go to two or three homes where they are served food and drinks. The bride’s party brings a dowry, and they are also given “kit” presents from the groom’s party. The bags with the dowry are opened by the groom’s close relatives and revealed to everybody in the room.

After some time, the girl’s parents also invite husband’s party to visit their home and homes of their friends, where they also treated as important guests.

After the couple is husband and wife, they live two weeks with the husband’s parents. The young wife wears kerchief during these two weeks. After two weeks the newlyweds leave to their own place, that is, if the husband is not the youngest son at home. Otherwise they stay with husband’s parents.

Due to coupled “tois” girls usually have also two wedding dresses, one for each ceremony. The most beautiful and festive dress is for the general wedding. Usually there is a week between “uzatu toi” and “groom’s toi”.

The number of guests vary from 100-150 for small weddings, to 500-600 persons in southern parts, where almost the entire village is invited. On average “toi” gathers about 200 people.

Celebrations and “tois” are usually hold on Fridays and Saturdays, so that people can come after work and need not worry about going work the next day.

These traditions may vary with the region and preferences of the parties, so all conditions and procedures are rather negotiable. Sometimes, parties prefer to hold one general wedding and skip the “uzatu toi” part.

If you have any other question, or need clarification, please feel free to contact me.

Source: 1) <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/5487.htm>