

TRADITIONS AND MODERN TRANSFORMATIONS OF UZBEK MARRIAGE CEREMONIES: AN ETHNOLOGICAL ANALYSIS OF THE SURKHAN OASIS**Khayrullayeva Zahro Alimamat qizi**

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Abstract. This article explores the ethnological dimensions, historical values, and modern transformations of traditional wedding rituals within Uzbek families, with a specific focus on the unique local characteristics of the Surkhan oasis. The study examines the socio-cultural functions of traditional matchmaking known as *sovchilik* (matchmaking), the symbolic meaning and protective attributes of the ancient craft of *quroq* (patchwork), and the institutional adaptations of weddings in the post-independence era (1991–2024). Special attention is given to the elimination of burdensome economic customs, such as *qalin* (bride price) and *sut puli* (milk money), and their replacement with sustainable family-building practices, alongside the introduction of mandatory pre-marital medical examinations under Article 17 of the Family Code of the Republic of Uzbekistan. Through a comparative historical lens, this research illuminates how contemporary Uzbek marriage ceremonies successfully synthesize historical custom with modern legal and scientific standards, preserving family stability and community solidarity.

Keywords: Ethnology, *sovchilik* (matchmaking), *quroq* (patchwork), *qalin* (bride price), *sut puli* (milk money), *nikoh* (marriage), Family Code, Surkhan oasis, transformation.

INTRODUCTION

In the traditional socio-cultural life of the Uzbek people, marriage is recognized as the most critical transition in the human life cycle, marking the creation of a new family unit and the formal expansion of kinship alliances. As a complex institutional system, the traditional Uzbek wedding, or *nikoh* (marriage), represents far more than a personal union between two individuals; it constitutes a comprehensive socio-economic, legal, and spiritual contract between two extended families and their broader communities. Historically, the wedding process is characterized by a series of highly structured, sequential ceremonies that govern every stage of the union, from initial selection and engagement to the final integration of the bride into her new household.

Within the geographically diverse landscape of Uzbekistan, the southern region of the Surkhan oasis stands out as a highly valuable repository of traditional marriage customs.

Historically situated at the intersection of nomadic, semi-nomadic, and settled agricultural civilizations, and characterized by intensive ethno-cultural contact with neighboring Tajik and Turkmen populations, the Surkhan oasis developed a distinct local wedding culture.¹

Traditionally, the wedding process begins with *sovchilik* (matchmaking), a highly structured practice of selecting a suitable bride through the mediation of respected female representatives. This initial stage is governed by strict rules of observation and evaluation, focusing on the bride's upbringing, household skills, and lineage. Following a successful negotiation, the union is formalized through engagement ceremonies such as *non sindirish* (bread-breaking ceremony) and the preparation of *fotiha oshi* (engagement feast).

¹Tursunov S.N., Qobilov E.O., Pardayev T.R. Surxondaryo tarix ko'zgasida. – Toshkent: Sharq, 2001.

These rituals serve to publicly announce the alliance and bind the two families to mutual moral and financial obligations.

A central element of the traditional wedding dowry is *quroq* (patchwork), an ancient textile craft possessing deep symbolic and protective meanings. Stitched from various colorful fabric remnants, *quroq* items are traditionally prepared by the bride's maternal relatives. This craft is believed to protect the new couple from the *yomon ko'z* (the evil eye) and symbolize the enduring strength, unity, and future prosperity of the family.²

However, the rapid socio-economic shifts of the post-independence period (1991–2024) have brought significant transformations to these ancient marriage customs. Under the influence of modernization, urbanization, and state-led legislative reforms, many traditional customs have been modified to align with modern human rights and economic realities. Historically burdensome practices, such as the payment of *qalin* (bride price) and *sut puli* (milk money), have been largely abandoned in favor of mutual family cooperation and the provision of practical household goods.

Furthermore, the introduction of mandatory pre-marital medical check-ups under the Family Code of the Republic of Uzbekistan represents a profound intersection of national tradition with modern state law, ensuring the physical and genetic health of future generations.

This study seeks to analyze these dynamics, exploring how contemporary Uzbek families navigate the delicate balance between preserving ancestral values and adapting to the demands of a modern, globalized society.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The study of Uzbek marriage customs and their regional variations is supported by a rich body of scientific literature, monographs, and ethnographic archives. Understanding the historical roots and contemporary evolution of these ceremonies requires a comprehensive analysis of works that explore both the general national patterns of Uzbek weddings and the specific local characteristics of the southern territories.

A crucial source for analyzing the general ethnological values and historical continuity of Uzbek ceremonies is the work of E. Qudratullayeva. Her studies focus on the structural components of the traditional Uzbek wedding, highlighting the role of rituals in reinforcing social hierarchy, community mutual aid, and kinship networks.³

The artistic, aesthetic, and spiritual dimensions of wedding crafts, specifically the practice of *quroq* (patchwork), have been extensively documented by the cultural researcher M. To'rayev. In his writings on the spiritual heritage of the Uzbek people, To'rayev analyzes the semiotics of patchwork, explaining how the combination of different colors and geometric shapes in *quroq* textiles represents a symbolic prayer for family unity, longevity, and defense against metaphysical harm.⁴

To comprehend the regional peculiarities of the southern regions, this study relies heavily on the historical-ethnographic research of S. Tursunov, E. Qobilov, and T. Pardayev. Their collaborative and individual works on the history and culture of the Surkhan oasis document the preservation of semi-nomadic kinship structures and traditional wedding songs, such as *yor-yor*

²To'rayev M. Milliy madaniyatimizning asriy an'anasi // Folklor va etnografiya. – Toshkent, 2018. – B. 12–18.

³Qudratullayeva E. O'zbek xalqining urf-odati, marosim va bayramlarining an'anaviyligi. "Oriental Art and Culture" Scientific Methodical Journal. Volume 4 Issue 6 / December 2023. – B. 415.

⁴To'rayev M. Milliy madaniyatimizning asriy an'anasi // Folklor va etnografiya. – Toshkent, 2018. – B. 12–18.

(traditional wedding songs sung during the bride's departure), which have retained more archaic features in the south compared to other regions of Uzbekistan.⁵

Additionally, the legal and economic transformations of the family institution in modern Uzbekistan are analyzed using contemporary legal commentaries and sociological surveys. The integration of traditional moral principles with modern family law, particularly regarding the rights of women and the abolition of forced marriages, is a central theme in modern sociological literature. These studies help contextualize the practical impact of state legislation, such as the Family Code, on the daily lives of rural and urban families.

METHODOLOGY

This research employs a qualitative ethnological methodology, combining historical-comparative analysis, structural-functional analysis, and descriptive ethnography. The primary objective is to investigate the structural changes and functional continuity of marriage rituals in the Surkhan oasis during the post-independence era (1991–2024).

The historical-comparative method is used to contrast traditional wedding practices documented in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries with modern ceremonies observed today. This comparison allows the researcher to trace the trajectory of specific rituals—such as *sovchilik* negotiations and dowry presentations—identifying which elements have been preserved, which have been discarded, and how they have been reinterpreted to meet contemporary economic and social needs.

The structural-functionalist approach is utilized to analyze the role of wedding rituals in maintaining community stability. Under this framework, rituals such as the public sharing of *to'y oshi* (wedding pilaf feast) and the performance of *kelin salom* (bride's salutation ceremony) are examined as social mechanisms designed to integrate the new bride into the groom's neighborhood and reinforce mutual support systems among relatives.

RESULTS

1. The Selection Phase and the Secrets of *Sovchilik*

The first formal stage of the marriage process in Uzbek society is *sovchilik* (matchmaking).

Historically, and to a large extent in contemporary rural areas of the Surkhan oasis, the process of selecting a bride is initiated by the groom's family. Respected senior female relatives—such as the groom's mother, grandmothers, or aunt—are designated as *sovchi* (matchmakers) to visit the home of the prospective bride.

Our ethnological findings reveal that *sovchilik* is characterized by a highly sophisticated system of non-verbal communication, observation, and social evaluation. When the *sovchi* enter the prospective bride's home, their evaluation begins immediately, focusing heavily on domestic order, cleanliness, and hospitality. Traditionally, particular attention is paid to the state of two key household areas: the kitchen and the restroom. According to local custom, if these areas are found to be clean, organized, and properly maintained, it is taken as a direct reflection of the prospective bride's diligence, hygiene, and household education. This practice is encapsulated in the popular folk proverb: "*Onasini ko'rib, qizini ol*" (Look at the mother before marrying the daughter), reflecting the belief that domestic skills and moral character are transmitted directly from mother to daughter.

The strategic social importance of this careful selection process finds deep historical justification in classical Central Asian statecraft.

⁵Tursunov S.N., Qobilov E.O., Pardayev T.R. Surxondaryo tarix ko'zgasida. – Toshkent: Sharq, 2001.

In the historical manuscript *Temur tuzuklari* (The Regulations of Timur), Amir Temur emphasizes the national and political significance of choosing a bride with extreme care, advising his descendants that selecting a bride was equal in importance to affairs of state.⁶

Following the initial visits, if both families find the match acceptable, the engagement is formalized through the *non sindirish* (bread-breaking ceremony). During this ritual, two flatbreads are broken by respected elders from both sides, accompanied by prayers and blessings.

This act signifies that the agreement is final and sacred. Following the bread-breaking, the groom's family hosts the *fotiha oshi* (engagement feast), where gifts are exchanged and the wedding plans are officially coordinated, binding both families to strict cooperative obligations.

2. The Semiotics of Quroq in the Uzbek Dowry

A central element of the traditional wedding dowry, or *sarpo* (traditional set of clothing and gifts presented to the groom or bride), is the ancient textile craft of *quroq* (patchwork). Stitched by the bride's maternal grandmother, mother, and aunts, *quroq* items—such as blankets, seat cushions known as *ko'rpacha* (traditional floor mattresses), and pillows—possess profound symbolic, protective, and social functions within the newly established household.

Ethnological analysis of patchwork in the Surkhan oasis reveals that the process of preparing *quroq* is highly ritualized. Maternal relatives traditionally gather remnants of colorful fabric from the clothing of elderly, healthy, and highly respected relatives who have lived long, prosperous lives. Stitching these specific remnants together is believed to magically transfer the life force, health, and good fortune of those ancestors to the new couple.

According to the cultural studies of M. To'rayev, the geometric patterns of *quroq* serve as a visual, non-verbal prayer for family unity. The term itself is derived from the Uzbek verb *quramoq*, meaning "to gather, join, or build." By physically joining together disparate, small pieces of cloth into a singular, beautiful, and functional textile, the craft symbolizes the joining of two distinct families into a unified, harmonious alliance.

Furthermore, *xalq e'tiqodi* (folk beliefs) attribute strong apotropaic properties to these patchwork textiles. The complex, highly fragmented patterns of contrasting colors are believed to confuse and deflect *yomon ko'z* (the evil eye) and ward off malevolent spiritual forces, protecting the young couple during their highly vulnerable transitional phase of early marriage.⁷

In contemporary Uzbek weddings, while the magical beliefs regarding spiritual protection have faded, *quroq* continues to be highly valued as an indispensable aesthetic symbol of national heritage, family warmth, and ancestral continuity.

3. Economic Transformations: The Transition from Qalin to Mutual Cooperation

Historically, traditional marriage in the Surkhan oasis, as in many other regions of Central Asia, was accompanied by significant economic transactions that often created immense financial strain on the groom's family. Chief among these customs was the payment of *qalin* (bride price), consisting of livestock, gold, and textiles presented to the bride's father, and *sut puli* (milk money), a cash payment given to the bride's mother to compensate her for rearing the daughter.

During the pre-independence era, particularly in rural nomadic and semi-nomadic communities, the demand for high *qalin* payments was a major social issue, sometimes leading to delayed marriages, economic hardship, or forced loans.

⁶Qudratullayeva E. O'zbek xalqining urf-odati, marosim va bayramlarining an'anaviyligi. "Oriental Art and Culture" Scientific Methodical Journal. Volume 4 Issue 6 / December 2023. – B. 415.

⁷To'rayev M. Milliy madaniyatimizning asriy an'anasi // Folklor va etnografiya. – Toshkent, 2018. – B. 12–18.

Following the independence of Uzbekistan in 1991, both state institutions and local *mahalla* (local self-governing community institutions) launched active campaigns to reform and simplify these economic customs, promoting moderate, sustainable family-building practices.⁸

Our ethnological findings demonstrate that during the years of independence (1991–2024), the practice of *qalin* has been almost entirely eliminated from the wedding culture of the Surkhan oasis. In modern Uzbek families, this burdensome payment has been replaced by a system of mutual, cooperative family contributions. Instead of paying a direct price to the bride's family, both sides now collaborate to invest resources directly into the young couple's future household.

The groom's family typically takes responsibility for organizing the main wedding feast and securing housing, while the bride's family provides the *sarpo* and modern household appliances. This economic transformation represents a profound structural shift from a transactional alliance model to a collaborative, equal-partnership model, reducing financial burden and fostering mutual respect between the united households.⁹

4. Legal and Health Integration: Article 17 of the Family Code

In contemporary Uzbek society, the traditional wedding has transcended its historical status as a purely familial and religious contract to become fully integrated into the legal and public health systems of the modern state. The most significant manifestation of this integration is the mandatory pre-marital medical examination introduced under the Family Code of the Republic of Uzbekistan.

According to Article 17 of the Family Code, young couples planning to register their marriage are legally required to undergo a comprehensive medical screening. This screening covers infectious diseases, genetic disorders, mental health conditions, and drug addictions. While the law strictly respects the personal rights and consent of the individuals, the process itself is mandatory before the state formally registers the union. This legal mechanism represents a highly effective, modern synthesis of state authority with the ancient national concept of *sog'lom avlod* (healthy generation). Historically, Uzbek families relied on informal pedigree checking, regional exogamy, and genealogical reviews conducted by *sovchi* to ensure healthy offspring and avoid consanguineous marriages. Today, the state has institutionalized this biological protection through scientific, constitutional means.¹⁰

By identifying potential genetic and medical disorders prior to marriage, Article 17 protects the physical and emotional stability of the future family, reduces infant mortality, and ensures the genetic health of future generations. This legal integration demonstrates that contemporary Uzbek marriage culture actively utilizes modern administrative and medical advancements to reinforce the traditional values of family stability, maternal protection, and healthy child development.

DISCUSSION

The socio-cultural and ethnological analysis of traditional marriage customs in modern Uzbekistan reveals a highly dynamic system of social regulation, legal integration, and kinship consolidation. Rather than being a static set of ancient rites, the Uzbek wedding represents a living institution that actively reflects the changing structural conditions of society.

⁸Tursunov S.N., Qobilov E.O., Pardayev T.R. Surxondaryo tarix ko'zgasida. – Toshkent: Sharq, 2001.

⁹Pardayev T.R. O'zbekistonning janubiy hududlarida ijtimoiy-iqtisodiy va madaniy hayot (1945–1991). Tarix fanlari doktori (DSc) dissertatsiyasi. – Termiz, 2021.

¹⁰Qudratullayeva E. O'zbek xalqining urf-odat, marosim va bayramlarining an'anaviyligi. "Oriental Art and Culture" Scientific Methodical Journal. Volume 4 Issue 6 / December 2023. – B. 415.

The modern wedding ceremony in the Surkhan oasis demonstrates how communities successfully negotiate the demands of traditional values, state-led legal reforms, and globalization.

A major area of discussion is the hybrid legal identity of contemporary weddings, specifically the relationship between the secular registration conducted by the state and the religious ceremony known as *xutbai nikoh* (religious marriage ceremony). During the early decades of the twentieth century, these two legal systems were often in conflict, with secular laws attempting to marginalize religious ceremonies.

However, during the period of independence (1991–2024), a successful reconciliation occurred. Today, religious figures are legally prohibited from performing *xutbai nikoh* until the couple presents an official marriage certificate from the state civil registry office, known as *FXDYO* (Civil Registry Office). This legal integration ensures both the legal protection of women's rights under secular family law and the spiritual validation of the union under religious tradition.¹¹

Another vital aspect of the modern wedding is the regulation of wedding expenditures.

Historically, wedding ceremonies were characterized by *dabdaba* (extravagance), which often led families into deep financial debt due to competitive social pressure. To address this, the state and the *mahalla* (local self-governing community institutions) introduced regulatory guidelines to limit the size, duration, and expense of weddings. Our ethnological findings show that these measures have been highly effective in the Surkhan oasis. Contemporary weddings have become more streamlined, focusing on efficiency, moderate hospitality, and direct investments into the young couple's future. This shift demonstrates the active, regulatory role of the *mahalla* in steering cultural practices toward sustainable and progressive family-building models.¹²

Gender Roles and the Evolution of the *Kelin Salom*

The transformation of gender dynamics within contemporary Uzbek marriage rituals is vividly illustrated by the performance of the *kelin salom* (bride's salutation ceremony).

Traditionally, this ritual is held the morning after the wedding, during which the new *kelin* (bride) formally greets her new father-in-law, mother-in-law, relatives, and neighbors by bowing deeply while wearing her wedding attire. Each greeting is accompanied by specific blessing songs, and the guests present the bride with gifts in return.

From a historical perspective, the *kelin salom* has sometimes been analyzed as a symbol of patriarchal submission, representing the bride's subordinate status within her husband's family.

However, contemporary ethnological research in the Surkhan oasis indicates a profound reinterpretation of this custom. Today, both the performers and the audience view *kelin salom* not as an act of subordination, but as a highly valued, theatrical, and artistic performance of national heritage.¹³

For the modern *kelin*, who is often educated and career-oriented, performing the deep bows is viewed as a sign of high moral culture, respect for the groom's parents, and an artistic expression of national identity.

¹¹Qudratullayeva E. O'zbek xalqining urf-odati, marosim va bayramlarining an'anaviyligi. "Oriental Art and Culture" Scientific Methodical Journal. Volume 4 Issue 6 / December 2023. – B. 415.

¹²Pardayev T.R. O'zbekistonning janubiy hududlarida ijtimoiy-iqtisodiy va madaniy hayot (1945–1991). Tarix fanlari doktori (DSc) dissertatsiyasi. – Termiz, 2021.

¹³Tursunov S.N., Qobilov E.O., Pardayev T.R. Surxondaryo tarix ko'zgasida. – Toshkent: Sharq, 2001.

In return, the gifts presented to the bride—often consisting of valuable textiles, jewelry, or home appliances—serve as her personal socio-economic capital, helping her establish independence within her new domestic space. This ritual thus serves as a powerful mechanism for building mutual respect, welcoming the bride into her new community, and preserving the aesthetic and poetic elements of Uzbek folklore in contemporary life.¹⁴

CONCLUSION

The ethnological study of traditional wedding ceremonies in Uzbek families, specifically in the Surkhan oasis, demonstrates that these rituals are vital for maintaining family stability and cultural continuity. Through practices such as *sovchilik* and the symbolic use of *quroq*, the community continues to transmit its core values of respect, mutual assistance, and kinship solidarity. Under the influence of independence (1991–2024), Uzbek wedding culture has shown remarkable adaptability, eliminating outdated economic burdens and successfully integrating modern legal and public health standards.

The transformation of *qalin* and *sut puli* from transactional payments to collaborative family contributions reflects a broader shift in social values toward gender equality and shared responsibility. Similarly, the legal requirement of pre-marital medical examinations under Article 17 of the Family Code demonstrates the state's active role in preserving the long-term health and stability of the family as a social institution. The *mahalla* continues to serve as an essential mediating institution, balancing the demands of tradition and modernity at the community level.

Ultimately, the Surkhan oasis case demonstrates that Uzbek marriage culture is not a relic of the past, but a living, evolving system of social values and communal solidarity. These ceremonies continue to serve as powerful mechanisms for reinforcing kinship bonds, fostering intergenerational respect, and preserving the distinctive cultural identity of the Uzbek people in the twenty-first century.

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¹⁴To'rayev M. Milliy madaniyatimizning asriy an'anasi // Folklor va etnografiya. – Toshkent, 2018. – B. 12–18.