



‘ARŪSĪ

‘ARŪSĪ, the secular wedding celebration which follows the wedding contract ceremony (*‘aqd*). The two ceremonies may occur on the same day or be separated by larger amounts of time—days, months, or even years. Only after the ‘*arūsī* do the new husband and wife begin married life. Most ‘*arūsī* observances are the responsibility of the groom’s family and constitute the culmination of involved processes of proposal and negotiation between the bride’s and groom’s families. This article is chiefly concerned with wedding ceremonies in traditional Persia and where the traditions are preserved.

Proposal (k̄vāst(a)gārī). When a young man reaches marriageable age, his family undertakes the task of finding a suitable wife for him. Sir John Chardin reported that in the late seventeenth century marriages were contracted before children were twenty years of age (Chardin, p. 238). Among the Kalhor tribe in Kurdistan, girls marry between ten and twenty years; the men are somewhat older—fifteen to twenty-five years (Ma‘šūmī, p. 58).

If an appropriate young lady is known or related to the family, the procedure is straightforward. If not, the process is more complicated and a young woman may be found through matchmaking (*dallālagī*). The women of the would-be groom’s family often take it upon themselves to locate a young woman and pay a visit to her family. If the young man’s relatives are served only tea, it is understood that the girl’s family is opposed to the match. The girl’s relatives express interest by serving sweets and perhaps a cooling drink (*šarbat*) along with the tea (Faqīrī, p. 76; Francklin, p. 110).



The girl being considered is scrutinized carefully by her prospective in-laws. Her speech and sweetness of breath are examined, and in Shiraz a young woman was customarily asked to clean a trayful of vegetables. Correct completion of the task indicated that a girl was patient and ready for marriage (Faḡīrī, p. 76). A young man's reputation and standing in the community are carefully investigated by the girl's family before an agreement can be reached. Family background, wealth, temperament, religiosity, health, looks, and education are all taken into account in reaching a decision.

If all appears well, women of the man's family escort him on a visit to the girl's home so that he can see his proposed bride. To accomplish this end, the girl's relatives may urge her to serve tea to him. Āl-e Aḡmad describes one such awkward visit in his story, "The Unwanted Woman" (pp. 72-74). Alternatively, a more surreptitious glance at the intended bride may be arranged (Savage-Landor, p. 194; Sykes, p. 69).

Betrothal (nāmzadī). When all parties are satisfied, a party to mark the agreement and arrange details of the match can be held. Friends and relatives are invited to the bride's home for an official celebration of the betrothal and gifts are sent to the girl's home by her fiancée's family. The guests enjoy tea, sherbet drinks, and sweets, and the betrothal is announced publicly. If the parents of the bride can afford it, professional musicians and dancers may entertain the guests (Savage-Landor, pp. 194-95).

The party is known variously as *šīrīnī-k̄vorān* "sweeteating" (Colliver Rice, p. 140), *bala-borān* "yes-completing" (Faḡīrī, p.77), or by a name which reflects the gifts given to the bride, such as *kafš pā konī* "putting shoes on" in Khorasan (Šokūrzāda, p. 144). Gifts are sent to the girl's home by the man's family and may include large trays of candied sugar, expensive shawls, a ring, and perhaps other jewelry. The elaboration of gifts depends upon the groom's family's status and means. In 1307/1889 the betrothal of Nāṣer-al-dīn Shah's eight-year-old daughter Aḡtar-al-dawla, to his favorite page Ġolām-'Alī Khan 'Azīz-al-soltān (Malījāk) was observed by the sending of 400 trays of sugar (*qand*) and bowls of rock candy (*nabāt*), four shawls, and seven pieces of jewelry (E'temād-al-saltāna, *Rūz-nāma*, pp. 672-73, 676).

In simpler versions of the *šīrīnī-k̄vorān*, the mother of the groom may bring a gold ring, some sweets, and sugar-coated almond slivers (*noql*) to the gathering. At a Kalhor tribe betrothal party in Kurdistan, the mother of the groom gives a gold ring to the bride; women celebrate and congratulate the



girl, tossing *noql* over her (Maʿšūmī, p. 61).

The betrothal ceremony traditionally involves a meeting of elder representatives of both families: the exact provisions of the marriage contract, including the amount of the *mahrīya* (marriage portion settled on the bride), clothes, and other gifts for the bride are determined. In the late eighteenth century Francklin found the gifts to be as follows: “These, if the person be in middling circumstances, generally consist of two complete suits of apparel of the best sort, a ring, a looking-glass, and a small sum in ready money of about ten or twelve tomans, which sum is denominated Mehr u Kawéén [*kābīn*], or the marriage-portion, it being given for the express purpose of providing for the wife in case of divorce. There is also a quantity of household stuff of all sorts, such as carpets, mats, bedding, utensils for dressing victuals, &c” (Francklin, pp. 110-11).

Among tribal groups the amount of *šīr-bahā* “milk price”—a sum of money, cattle, horses, or sheep that the groom or his father pays to the bride’s mother for having nursed her—is also agreed upon at this meeting (Maʿšūmī, p. 61). The *šīr-bahā* remains important in some rural areas and is a measure of the groom’s esteem for the bride’s family (Sāʿedī, p. 144).

At the betrothal meeting a day might also be set for a trip to the bazaar so that cloth and other items promised to the bride could be purchased (Faḳīrī, p. 77; Maʿšūmī, p. 61).

In Shiraz the visit to the bazaar was traditionally followed by a cloth cutting party (*raḳt-borān*). Women of the bride and groom’s families gathered to take the bride’s measurements and cut cloth for her wedding garments. Women thoroughly enjoyed themselves at these gatherings, played tambourines, danced, and sang special wedding songs (*vāsūnak*) (Faḳīrī, p. 77).

Observances prior to the wedding party (ʿarūsī). Once the marriage contract ceremony has been held and the contract (*ʿaqd-nāma*) signed, the couple are legally united. The actual union of the bride and groom is left to the *ʿarūsī* celebration, which includes consummation of the marriage. Faḳīrī comments that if a bride is married at an *ʿaqd* ceremony, but does not complete the marriage with an *ʿarūsī* celebration within a reasonable period of time (a year at the most), it is thought in Shiraz that one of the bride or groom’s relatives will die, and a death in the family during that period is often referred to by the phrase *šekār kardā ast* (she has hunted) (Faḳīrī, p. 80). Some time may pass



between the contract ceremony and the *'arūsī*, either to allow a young bride to mature—perhaps a matter of years—or to leave time to make preparations for the wedding—a week to a month after the *'aqd*. An auspicious time is chosen for the wedding party.

The time which elapses between the *'aqd* and the *'arūsī* is dealt with in various ways. Savage-Landor noted visits between the bride and groom, with the groom bringing fine gifts for his fiancée on each occasion (p. 198). Family members too have a chance to get acquainted during the interval. Often the groom is obliged to give a gift to the bride's family on each important holiday—especially *Īd-e Feṭr* and the new Year, *Nowrūz*. The bride's family may provide him with a sumptuous holiday dinner in return (Faḡīrī, p. 80; Rīāḡī, p. 48). In Shiraz the favor is returned by the groom's mother-in-law after the wedding, especially at *Īd-e Feṭr*. She must also provide her son-in-law with an elaborate meal (*eftārī*) to break the fast during *Ramaḡān* (Faḡīrī, p. 80). In contrast, the Kurdish Kalhor do not allow the bride and groom to see one another between the two ceremonies (Maḡḡmī, p. 61).

The day and evening before the wedding are spent in preparation for the celebration. Faḡīrī reports that in Shiraz the bridal chamber (*ḡajla*) is readied and rice cleaned for the wedding dinner by women who celebrate and sing wedding songs as they work (p. 78). The bride and groom each visit the public bath (*ḡammām*); once bathed, henna is applied to their hands and feet or hair and fingernails. Francklin describes the ceremony of the evening on which henna is applied—*ḡab-e (ḡanā)-bandī*. The groom sent henna to the bride's house. After her hands and feet were stained, the remainder of the henna was returned to the groom and he was decorated as well (pp. 113-14).

On the day of the wedding the bride is elaborately made up and dressed in her finery; the groom also wears new clothes bought for the occasion.

Each locale has its own ways in which the participants are prepared. Āl-e Aḡmad mentions that in the village *Owrāzān* the groom visits the *ḡammām* on the night before his wedding, puts on his wedding clothes and pays a visit to the local shrine (*emāmzāda*). The groom then spends the evening on the roof of his house (in summer time) with other men, and his guests pledge wedding gifts, with promises to deliver the presents before the bride arrives at the groom's house. Older men leave the groom and his friends to a bachelor party which lasts throughout the night. In the morning the tired groom is taken on a round of visits in the neighborhood and returns home at noon (Āl-e Aḡmad,



Owrāzān, pp. 35-36).

The bride's dowry (*ĵahāz*, *ĵahīz*, *ĵahīziya*) is packed in trunks, often covered with brightly colored velvet and sent to the groom's house before the wedding celebration. Ma'šūmī lists the Kalhor girl's dowry as her hope chest, several *ĵāĵīms* (flat-woven, woollen blankets), a mattress, a quilt, a few skins filled with water and one with a yogurt drink (*dūġ*), and a skin filled with cooking oil (ibid., p. 63). In poorer areas, the dowry is less elaborate. *Owrāzān* girls seldom have more than one trunk of belongings as their dowry, which includes clothes for the bride and groom, a long tobacco pouch (*kīsa-ye tūtūn*), a pant's drawstring (*band-e tonbān*) and a luncheon cloth belt (*sofra-ye kamarī*) (ibid., p. 36).

By contrast, dowries of wealthy urban brides might include fine household furniture, an ample supply of cooking utensils, numerous carpets and boxes of clothes all mounted on gaily decorated mules. Transfer of the dowry to the groom's house is a festive event and may attract a large and interested audience (Sykes, pp. 77-78). Items included in Shiraz dowries are put on display, along with the wedding presents (Faqīrī, p. 79).

A well-to-do groom's family may sponsor several days of wedding celebrations before the bride is brought to the house. Shirazi families of means customarily chose to include theatrical performance (*te'ātr-e tak̄t-e ĥawzī*) in the wedding entertainment (Faqīrī, p. 79). Savage-Landor remarks that, "Usually for ten days or less before the wedding procession takes place a festival is held in the bridegroom's house, when the mullahs, the friends, acquaintances, relations and neighbours are invited—fresh guests being entertained each night. Music, dancing, and lavish refreshments are again provided for the guests" (p. 198). By holding these parties on separate evenings, guests of different sorts, classes, and inclinations may be regaled with entertainment and refreshments suited to their tastes and station. The number of nights on which celebrations are held corresponds to the family's wealth and social obligations. When Chardin was in Isfahan, two weeks were devoted to the wedding of the eldest son of the "Nazir" to the daughter of Dīvānbīgī. "The Wedding lasted Fourteen Days. The Three first, the Parents only, were treated; Several Lords of the Court were treated on the Fourth; the King's Favourites on the Fifth; and the Generals of the Army on the Sixth: The Pontiffs, and the most considerable of the Clergy on the Seventh. The first Minister was treated on the Eighth, and the King, the next Day after. The Tenth, was for the Chancellor, and the Secretaries of State. The Eleventh for the principal Men of Letters. And on the three last Days, other



Persons of Note were invited; so that there was not any Person of Consideration, either at Court or in the City, who was not at the Wedding. It is said to have cost the Nazir Four hundred thousand Livres, the greatest part in Presents to the Guests” (op. cit., I, p. 73).

The wedding procession. Persian weddings have long been noted for the grand processions in which the bride is escorted to her new husband’s home (*Āgānī*, cited in Heffening, p. 1038). On the day of the wedding, the bride is outfitted for her trip to the grooms house. A young boy may tie a bit of bread and cheese wrapped in a cloth to the bride’s waist (Hedāyat, p. 23) or hand it to her (Sykes, p. 79), or an older woman may tie a bit of bread wrapped in a scarf around the bride’s waist (Ma’sūmī, p. 63). The bread later figures in the bride’s meeting with her husband in the bridal chamber (*ḥajla*). A pink or red veil traditionally is placed over the bride’s head and face (Ma’sūmī, p. 63). At the time Francklin was in Iran in the late eighteenth century the bride was “covered from head to foot in a veil of red silk or painted muslin” (op. cit., p. 115). Women accompanying the bride also wore red silk veils and the presents from the bridegroom to the bride were placed on trays covered with red silk (pp. 114-16).

Relatives and friends of the groom go on foot or on horseback to fetch the bride. If the distance is long, they may entertain themselves with races along the way. Nowadays the trip is often made by car, with beeping of horns and singing by the passengers.

The groom’s representatives may be served some refreshment at the bride’s house before they return to the groom. In Shiraz they steal something from the bride’s house—perhaps a spoon or a glass—in the belief that the theft assures the groom’s success on the wedding night. The father of the bride allows the group to take his daughter only after he has received the official written marriage contract (*qabāla-ye ‘arūsī*) from them (Faqīrī, p. 78). In most places, the parents of the bride remain at home and do not attend the ‘*arūsī*’ celebration at the groom’s house. Attendance at the celebration during the consummation is said to be particularly upsetting to the bride’s mother.

At various stages of the bride’s departure, procession and arrival at the groom’s house, those escorting the bride may refuse to allow her to proceed until a gift is presented to them by a representative of the groom’s family (Ma’sūmī, p. 64; Rīāḥī, p. 50; Sykes, p. 80).



The veiled bride is seated astride a gaily caparisoned mule or horse, or—for aristocratic urban families in the past—in a coach, and is conducted through the streets. Traditionally, a large mirror is held in front of the bride as she traverses the way to her husband’s home. She gazes into the mirror, told, says Francklin, “that it is the last time she will look into the glass a virgin” (op. cit., p. 115). Great care must be taken with the mirror; if it breaks, the bride is sure to have bad luck (Faqīrī, p. 79).

An elaborate wedding procession would be arranged in the following order: “first, the musicians and dancing girls; after which the presents in trays borne on men’s shoulders; next come the relations and friends of the bridegroom, all shouting and making a great noise; who are followed by the bride herself, surrounded by all her female friends and relations, one of whom leads the horse by the bridle; and several others on horseback close the procession” (Francklin, pp. 115-16). In some places the horse is led by one of the bride’s male relatives (Ma’sūmī, p. 64). If the groom had an official position, soldiers, bands, and servants would complete the bride’s retinue (Savage-Landor, p. 199). Wild rue (*esfand*) is burned as the procession goes forward and when the bride arrives at the groom’s house. The pungent smoke of the burning herb protects the bride from the evil eye.

As the bride and her entourage proceed through the streets people along the route may sprinkle her with rose water and perhaps *noql* candy or raisins. The bride’s approach may be announced by gunshots and, for the wealthy, fireworks (Savage-Landor, p. 199; Sykes, p. 80).

In some areas the groom awaits the bride’s arrival on the roof of his house and three times throws sugar (*qand*), a pomegranate, or an apple at her as she draws near. If he hits her or the object passes over her head, it portends his success on the wedding night (Āl-e Aḥmad, *Owrāzān*, p. 50). Hedāyat writes that the groom tosses a sour orange (*nāranj*) at his bride. Should she catch it, she will be the stronger partner in the marriage (op. cit., p. 23).

When the bride approaches the house, the procession stops and one or more sheep are sacrificed as thanks to God and to assure a good future for the marriage. The meat is distributed to those who accompany the procession—musicians, soldiers, etc.—and to the poor (Savage-Landor, p. 199; Sykes, p. 80).

Numerous customs reflect the desire that the groom dominate his wife, or may



show that she will rule over him. For example, the groom may remain on the roof over the door of the house as the bride enters, so that she must pass under his feet (Hedāyat, p. 23).

The groom's father or his guardian greets the bride at the door. All men leave at this point and the bride is escorted to a chamber, where she stands on a couch holding a candle while others dance around her for an hour or so with rhythmic clapping of their hands (Āl-e Aḥmad, op. cit., p. 50; Colliver Rice, pp. 145-46; Savage-Landor, p. 201).

The bridal chamber (ḥajla). A room at the groom's house is set aside and decorated as the bridal chamber. The walls may be hung with colored cloth and the bed spread with a satin coverlet. In simpler circumstances, bedding may be spread with a white cloth (Ma'ṣūmī, p. 64). The bedclothes should be arranged by a woman who has been *yekbaḳt*, i.e., she has not shared her husband with a co-wife (*havū*) (Hedāyat, op. cit., p. 24).

At length the groom joins his bride and they seated next to one another. Some advise that the husband perform two units of prayer (*do rak'at namāz*) in the *ḥajla*. A family elder gives the bride's and groom's hands to one another. The groom's hand should stay on top of the bride's so he will always prevail over her. In Shiraz the little fingers of the bride's and groom's hands are rinsed with rose water over a basin, into which the couple throw coins. The rose water is later poured at the foot of a green tree (Faqīrī, p. 79). Elsewhere, the bride and groom may wash each other's feet with rose water. First the bride's right big toe is placed under the groom's right big toe and rinsed, then her left big toe is placed under his and they are washed. The couple then toss gold coins into the basin at their feet. Hedāyat comments that the rose water caught in the basin is sprinkled on the wall to bring blessing (*barakat*) to the house. This done, the husband may remove his wife's veil, but only after he has given her a gift of jewelry. The gift is called *rūgoṣā* or *rūnamā*, literally "displaying the face."

The bride and groom now eat some of the sweet bread or bread and cheese which the bride has brought in a handkerchief from her home. The couple is then left alone for the consummation (*zefāf*) of the marriage. A woman of the bride's family or, in rarer instances, a female relative of the groom (Ma'ṣūmī, p. 66) remains outside the door of the bridal chamber.

Successful consummation of the marriage is announced to the guests by



gunshots (Maʿšūmī, p. 66), drumming (Āl-e Aḥmad, op. cit., p. 50), or ululation (*kel zadan*) by the female guests (Faḡīrī, p. 79).

Traditionally, the woman who remained outside the *ḥajla* displays the bloodied cloth demonstrating the bride's virginity on her wedding night to the female guests. Among the Kurdish Kalhor, the cloth is given to the mother of the bride, who keeps it for a year (Maʿšūmī, p. 66).

Observances following the ʿarūsī. The time immediately following the wedding is punctuated by special observances which mark the bride's new womanhood and introduce the new husband and wife to the community as a married couple. For three days following the consummation of the marriage, an Owrāzān bride neither speaks nor touches anything. A more lenient attitude is mentioned by Āqā Jamāl K̄vānsārī in his treatise on the customs prevalent among Persian women. According to the work, the young wife may give up praying for forty days and, if married in Ramazān, need not fast (*ʿAqāʿed al-nesāʿ*, tr. Atkinson, p. 46).

After the consummation, the bride and groom must both perform ritual ablutions (*ḡosl-e ḡenābat*). When the groom goes to the public bath, an unmarried male relative accompanies him; it is thought that the single man will marry soon thereafter. A like custom prevails with the bride and her unmarried companion will be fortunate (*safīdbakt*) in the same way (Hedāyat, p. 24).

On the morning following the wedding night, in Shiraz, the groom visits his mother-in-law, kisses her hand, and escorts her to his house (Faḡīrī, p. 79).

The husband and wife often make their first public appearances at dinners sponsored by relatives. The custom of sponsoring such formal introductions to society for the newly married couple is known as *pāgošā*, a sort of "stepping out." A Shirazi father of the bride, traditionally invites his new son-in-law and his friends for dinner or lunch a week after the *ʿarūsī*. From that time on, others may extend invitations to them (Faḡīrī, p. 80). In Kurdistan some three days to a week after the wedding night, the father of the bride sends meat and other foodstuffs for a celebration at the groom's house. Only women attend this version of *pāgošā*. The women enjoy the meal sponsored by the father of the bride, sing and dance. Afterwards the mother of the bride takes her daughter home for a weeklong visit, at the end of which the groom arrives and takes his wife back to his house (Maʿšūmī, p. 66). In urban areas, family dinner



parties held for a newly married couple suffice as a contemporary form of *pāgošā*.

Baluchi practice stands out as an exception. The wedding night is celebrated at the bride’s home and the consummation takes place there. The couple then spends a month with the bride’s family, after which they begin their life together at the groom’s house (Riāhī, p. 50).

Despite differences in wealth and details of ‘*arūsī*’ observances all wedding traditions express certain relationships and hopes. The union of two families through marriage, and the transfer of the bride to her husband’s group are celebrated in the wedding ceremonies. Each group attempts to fulfill its wedding obligations in a manner which reflects well on the family’s social position. Every effort—practical and ritual—is made to get the couple off to a good start, assuring smooth relations with in-laws, fertility of the bride, and a felicitous relationship between the husband and wife.

For legal aspects of marriage and wedding ceremonies in Afghanistan, Tajikistan, and among the Iranian minorities, see [Marriage](#).

For a music sample, see [Vāsunak](#).

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(A. Betteridge)