

ROLE OF SOVIET INFLUENCE ON WEDDING RITUALS: REFLECTIONS OF  
AZERBAIJANI CULTURAL PRACTICES

Jeyran Jafarova

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Thesis supervisor: Dr. Umut Ozkaleli

Committee Members: Dr. Lala Jumayeva, Dr. Ferit Murat Ozkaleli

APPROVED

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## Abstract

This study focuses on the role of religion as a cultural element, specifically investigating its influence on wedding rituals and its potential impact on cultural change by providing insight into the ensuing cultural transformation of Azerbaijan throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The study aims to examine how religious practices within marriage ceremonies reflect cultural transformations throughout the Soviet period. The main discussion point is to find out the possible implications of the change in dominant cultural policy on lives of Azerbaijanis. To gain insights into historical shifts and the significance of religion, interviews were conducted with older generation women in Azerbaijan, allowing for a retrospective exploration of wedding practices through their experiences. Key concepts employed in this study include culture, cultural memory, cultural violence, intersectionality, and the cultural domain of power. The findings indicate that various regions exhibit distinct traditions in different stages of life, including wedding customs. The inhabitants of capital city were the ones mainly affected by the new cultural policies and regions of Azerbaijan could save their old traditions preserving the religious elements in it. Another finding was that family's proximity to government (if they are serving for the ruling Communist Party) also had role in holding the traditional weddings. To explain, the ones working for the government had their weddings in Soviet style and avoided the religious elements in it. Findings show that, despite the introduction of atheistic ideologies and societal changes, religious practices and certain traditions continued to be observed privately.

## Acknowledgment

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## INTRODUCTION

If the governing body promotes totally different values, it becomes reflected in various aspects of the governance, including the laws, rules and regulations (Landis, 1935). This would mean lives of individuals and communities change in many aspects including social and cultural practices. Being guided by this idea, this study is concerned with the changes of the dominant cultural policy implied by the governing body and its implications on the lives of Azerbaijanis. To explain, Soviet leaders promoting different values shaped the lifestyles of inhabitants living in different Republics under the USSR. One of the main goals of the Soviet Union was to inculcate the behaviors of people in accordance with socialist values such as anticapitalism, collectivistic values and atheism (Shaw 2011). These lead me to explore the impact of political changes on cultural transformation in the system, a primary topic of analysis within this research study. Any change in the governing structure has effects on the dominant culture of a country. Such a change influences other coexisting cultures. Other nationalities possessing the old traditional values face challenges in preserving their cultural values under the influence of the “Dominant Soviet Culture”. Under the USSR, Azerbaijan also faced the same challenge of preserving its traditional values vis-à-vis Soviet state dominance and cultural hegemony.( Eventually, the overall study will try to find an answer on the following question:

*How Sovietization of the culture was reflected on wedding rituals(1920-1991) ?*

Considering the key role of wedding rituals in Azerbaijani culture, this paper ultimately connects the outcomes of the study on wedding culture as a reflection of cultural identity in Azerbaijan. By exploring the evolution of wedding traditions, this study aims to discover how the cultural transformation influenced the society and in what ways practices have continued or re-formulated. This study is concerned about religion as a cultural element. The study aims to discover the

changes in culture through the study of wedding rituals and the role of religion in it as the main indicator of change in culture. To analyze the overall available literature *Internal* and *External* parts are separately introduced. The main reason behind it is that the topic studies the wedding rituals of Azerbaijan and its possible changes, thus it would be better for the reader to firstly comprehend the Azerbaijani culture itself and then move towards the third factors influencing it. The literature review indicates that Azerbaijan's geopolitical location makes it on the center for fights between big powers. Being under the rule of different dominant powers resulted in different dominant cultures affecting the cultural formation of Azerbaijan. The main external cultures influencing Azerbaijan from the very existence were Islam as a religion, Russian and Turkish influence over Azerbaijan. Multiple cultural influences continue to exist yet in this study, as the governing body became Soviet, the study focuses on Soviet cultural hegemony. The main concepts used in this study were culture, cultural memory, cultural violence, intersectionality and cultural domain of power. As the main concept, culture is defined and articulated. Furthermore, understanding the cultural memory was one of the main departure points to comprehend. The stories of women, as participants of this study, were essential. Also, while trying to understand the stories of those women discovering possible interruptions to wedding rituals by the Soviet Union paved the way to introduction of cultural violence as the concept in this study. Coming to other concepts being intersectionality and cultural domain of power, help to understand the reasons why publicly exercised traditions started to change with the change of the one who holds the power over cultural sphere. Standpoint theory is a methodological approach that will be elaborated on the following section. I utilize narrative approach as it surfaces how people positioned themselves. Older generation women<sup>1</sup> that were interviewed will help us to dive into history and see, through

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<sup>1</sup> "Older generation women" in this study refer to women who were born in 1950s and prior in the Azerbaijan SSR and had parents who lived before Sovietization.

their eyes, how the wedding practices changed in Azerbaijan, and what was the role of religion in it. One of the reflections of how religion was experienced was in marriage ceremonies and weddings. In order to observe the changes as well as enduring cultural reflections, this study focused on memories of older generation woman. The analysis showed that different regions have had different traditions for different aspects of life including the wedding culture. I argue that those differences were characterized by different means, one of them being the proximity of the region and people to central government. The ones working for the Communist Party were more likely to have modest weddings and particular cases proved that some women were forced to follow the new traditions. Another interesting aspect of the study was, despite the changes and promoted atheistic ideas people were practicing religious activities and some traditions privately.

#### *Significance of the study*

The aim of this study is to discover the religion's role as a cultural element reflected in wedding rituals. It aims to observe the possible changes, continuations and interruptions (if there were any) to be seen in the cultural evolution of Azerbaijan during the Soviet era. In order to investigate the focus of the study, I explored the life experiences of women across different regions of Azerbaijan and how these experiences have impacted their perceptions of wedding rituals. By providing new insights on this topic, the study contributes to understand how people react to different demonstrations of political power and how their cultural identities unfold. In-depth understanding of cultural expressions is needed for policy designs of various aspects of social life. Without understanding the values of people, the meaning of their cultural expressions, their needs cannot be properly identified. For instance, the findings of this study, particularly about the respondents' changes in perception of traditional wedding customs, can be used to compare or contrast other

areas of life, exploring in what ways people could be given access to practices that make their life meaningful and rich as a community. Cultural practices could bring communities together to create peaceful existence.

Moreover, this study serves as a pilot study for future research on the life of women in Azerbaijan and related topics. The findings of this research may pave the way for new research on various aspects of Azerbaijan's cultural formation, including Soviet cultural policy and its impact on people, traditions, and the role of religion. Such research can lead to a better understanding of the lived experiences of women in Azerbaijan and contribute to the development of policies and interventions that promote gender equality and improve the lives of women in the country.

In addition, this study provides a nuanced understanding of the complex interplay between social, cultural, and economic factors that shape the perceptions of women about wedding rituals in Azerbaijan. The study sheds light on the diversity of experiences across different regions of Azerbaijan and highlights the need for context-specific policies and interventions. The study's findings may also have practical implications for policymakers and practitioners working in areas such as education, social services, cultural heritage and women's rights.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Internal Context

#### *The historical context of Azerbaijan*

Azerbaijan, located in the South Caucasus, is between Europe and Asia, bordered by Russia in the north, Iran in the south, Georgia in the northwest, and Turkey and Armenia in the West. Azerbaijan, with mostly Turkic-speaking inhabitants, has ancestral memories of different religions and ethnicities. Becoming the battlefield of Iran and Ottoman, as well as Tsarist rule and afterward Soviet rule, had a considerable impact on the life of the inhabitants of this country (Swietochowski, 2002).

Azerbaijan is characterized by a multi-ethnic society with various religious faiths, including Zoroastrianism and Christianity, for the pre-Islamic period. However, in 7th history, the Arab conquest and conversion to Islam significantly impacted the formulation of unique ethnicity and language (Zardabli, 2004). The Azerbaijani states (Shirvanshahs, Sajids, Salaris, Ravvadids, Sheddadids) were the next important part of formulating the Azerbaijani nation and forming a common language and culture that existed between 9-11th centuries. They were the main turning point to unite the people against common enemies, and this helped to unify by common traditions and culture brought by Islam (Zardabli, 2004). The next glorious historical part belongs to Azerbaijan under the Safavids empire, which was Azerbaijan. Turkic origin consolidated the nation-state, and Islam unified the entire contemporary Azerbaijan (Ismailov, 2010). Afterward, in Khanades' time in the 18th century and continued Ottoman attempts to conquer these lands, Russo-Persian wars over these territories resulted in some parts of Azerbaijani territories go under the rule of different empires (Zardabli, 2004). October revolution and the collapse of Tsarist rule triggered the formation of the Azerbaijan Democratic Republic, which had a revolutionary role in

statehood and the formation of the idea of being Azerbaijani in history (Seyidzade, 2010). The end of 1920 is signified by the Sovietization of Azerbaijan. Positively, the system unified people under its umbrella, invested in developing a skilled labor force by fighting illiteracy, and brought stability to the region. However, the unfair solutions to problems including the formation of Autonomous Nagorno-Karabakh (current Karabakh region of Azerbaijan), the oppression of national cultural values to create *Homo Sovieticus*<sup>2</sup>, and the Repression of Azerbaijani Intelligentsia are among the negative sides that Sovietization brought (Isgandarov, 2012). 1991 marks the restoration of independence of the Republic of Azerbaijan from the USSR, which is celebrated annually on October 18 by ~~whole~~ Azerbaijanis.

### *The cultural background of Azerbaijan*

As stated in the historical background section, Azerbaijan went through different periods and ruling under different political systems throughout history. That is the main reason that there have been different dominant cultures in different times of history, directly affecting the development of culture among the population. Eventually, according to Swietochowski (1996, pp. 223, 225, 226, 228, 233), attitudes toward foreign powers constantly changed. Sometimes inhabitants were pro-Russian, other times, they were pro-Ottoman or pro-British, depending on which country was in control in Transcaucasia at that moment. Unsurprisingly, each phase and attitude had a different impact on cultural formation. To explain these changes and their impact, Tokluoghlu (2005) discusses two terms introduced by Anthony Smith (1986) : classical (territorial nationalism) and

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<sup>2</sup> "Homo Sovieticus" is a term coined by the Soviet writer and sociologist, Aleksandr Zinovyev (1986), to describe the archetype of a conformist individual in the Soviet Union and other Eastern Bloc countries. The term has been used pejoratively to denote a typical Soviet citizen who adheres to the prevailing ideology of the state and exhibits little individuality or critical thinking. Zinoviev's book, titled "Homo Sovieticus" (1986) , played a significant role in popularizing this concept.

modern (emphasis on ethnicity and localism, which is the heritage of Soviet Azerbaijan), to identify the formation. She argues that Azerbaijan combines both forms since we may observe the creation of the state first and, afterward, the formulation of the nation based on past ethnic memory. It is necessary to revoke the population's collective memory of the past based on local practices to allow for the emergence of ethnic and religious ideologies that have the potential to unite people. Coming from a historical context, the ethnic composition of Azerbaijan is very diverse, and this diversity leads the multicultural policy to be leading on the agenda of Azerbaijan's policy (Etnik rəngarənglik, 2016). According to 2009 statistics provided by State Statistics Committee, Lezgis, Russians, Armenians, Talish, Avar, Tatars, Saxurs, Ukrainians, Kurds, Georgians, Jews, and Udis are among the different ethnic minorities living in Azerbaijan being overall 8.4% of the whole population. Each ethnicity, by bringing its own culture and traditions, enriches the country's overall cultural life. Government, to support minorities, established a State Counselor for National Minorities and Religious Organizations in 2005 (Its current name is State Counsellor for Multicultural and Religious Affairs). Also, it took part in the 2016 founding of the International Center for Multiculturalism, whose goal is to advance the Azerbaijani model of multiculturalism on a global scale. However, some authors disagree with the currently applied multiculturalism policy of the state. They believe as well as name the cohabitation of different communities in the nation-state (Azerbaijan) is the challenge for country (Filou, 2021). According to Filou (2021), multiculturalism and tolerance are modern sides of the country, and it is hard to synchronize them with Turkic and Islamic elements. The example of Ali bey Huseynzadeh's article where he mentioned the principles of Azerbaijani identity in *Hayat* journal in 1905- Turkify (blue), Modernise/Westernise (red), and Islamise (green)- is given to support the idea (Filou, 2021).

To define the cultural background of Azerbaijan, the Soviet period also should be analyzed. The former Soviet Union was trying to create a unified Soviet citizen; thus, aiming to abolish the past cultural memories of the nations. As Altstadt (1994) pointed out Soviets' policy towards minorities was a "culture wars," which also impacted Azerbaijani culture. For example, aiming to create proletarian literature had a long-lasting effect on destructing the native culture by involving the local artists in *the Union of Proletarian Writers, the Union of Soviet Artists*, etc. (Altstadt 1994). Continuing this policy, for non-developed Muslim communities living in the Soviet Union, the government constructed the framework within which those communities could create their history books. Additionally, Soviet fear of Pan-Turkism and Pan-Islamism was the other base for creating a new Azerbaijani model (neither Turkic nor Muslim to avoid the unification of people against the government) by interfering with the historical background of Azerbaijan. For example, Javanshir, a seventh-century Albanian Christian prince and commander, and Babek, a ninth-century staunch defender of Zoroastrianism and the leader of the rebellion against Islam, became the new national heroes of Azerbaijan. These heroes were popularized as Azerbaijani born without connection to Islamic or Turkic features (Garagozov, 2012). Only after Glasnost and Perestroika times of the Soviet Union (by releasing the archives that contained new and previously unreleased material, Glasnost and Perestroika gave these discussions a new dynamic) attention was given to studying the "blank spots" of our history (Garagozov, 2012). A similar argument was made by Suleymanli (2021) too, who argued that isolating Azerbaijani culture from Turkic history was always the purposeful aim of the Soviet policy. Most of the cultural events were either completely hidden or displayed in a distorted way. That is why after the restoration of independence, one of the main purposes of the researchers was to study the cultural roots or so-called "blank spots" of our history. Tokluoghlu, with her interviews (2005), brought a very interesting discussion from people stating

that once in the Soviet period going to Russian schools was fancy and for you to have a better job, Russian was essential. Now, the same applies to English. Meaning currently, the dominant culture is English and western culture affects the development of 21st-century Azerbaijani culture. In my analysis the data obtained from the field reveals importance and influence of Russian language and education. While English is becoming prominent, today's education system reflect multicultural layers as there is a Russian, Turkish and English sector departments schools all over Azerbaijan.

Interestingly there are also some groups who are against the idea that the Soviets' policy towards culture was destructive. Tokluoghlu, by bringing the interview results of Azerbaijanis from different backgrounds, brings some more interesting opposing perspectives (2005). Apparently, some Azerbaijanis view the Soviet empire and its impacts on our culture as the main factor in making our culture stand out compared to other Muslim communities by bringing modernity. Some interviewees argued that Azerbaijani culture belongs to Islam, others to Iranian, some to Turkic, and some even to Caucasian values. Azerbaijanis being under influence of different dominant cultures of big empires could enrich its culture. Some authors even judged the Muslim identity that Azerbaijanis expressed belonging to, being not compatible with universally accepted Muslim identity. For example, Suleymanli (2021), by describing the Azerbaijani culture in the 20th century, mentioned that an ordinary Azerbaijani would directly describe his or her nationality as Muslim rather than Turkic or Azerbaijani whereas arguing that religion and nationality are distinct concepts. However, Anderson (1983) argued the religion to be unifying umbrella so that with the emergence of printing people got national consciousness of their commonalities which later gave rise to formation of nation-state. What Anderson meant about religion is that religions could create a sense of community across the globe through “a sacred language and written script” (1983). In

this study, whether people perceive their marriage practices as traditional or religious, if they attribute any practice to religion will be examined from their perspective. In other words, their narrative will be taken as a departure point for the analysis.

### *Marriage/wedding-related literature in Azerbaijan*

Marriages are central to Azerbaijani culture and have important socio-economic functions (Tohidi, 1999). Until today people are impatiently waiting for the wedding party to be thrown. Interestingly, people use wedding ceremonies as a legitimate excuse for missing their work or other important responsibilities (Yalçın-Heckmann, 2001). Coming from the important value given to marriage in Azerbaijan stigmatization of late marriage and singlehood was problematic for the society (UN Azerbaijan, 2015). Restating previous arguments about the importance of marriage in society, this issue resulted in several problems, including the early marriage of girls, which was common in the pre-Soviet period (UNFPA, 2014). Soviet policies towards Islamic societies was to create better conditions for women to study, abolish child marriages, encourage unveiling and etc. Eventually, these policies decreased the above-mentioned problem during the Soviet times (Edgar, 2006). After the Soviets, the new law prohibiting marriage before the age of 18 decreased the official number of early marriages (SSC, 2021). Whereas non-official marriage registered by local Mullahs was still present, it was not counted in State Statistics (UNFPA, 2014). For example, according to State Statistics Committee children born from 15-17 aged women in 1995 it was 2198 but decreased to 1864 in 2000. However, numbers changed from 2743 in 2005 to 4103 in 2010 (Azerbaijan State Statistics Committee, 2012) supporting the claim of UNFPA of increased child marriages in 2010, specifically in south part of Azerbaijan (UNFPA, 2014).

While an important topic, early marriages is not the focal point of this study. The study focuses on the cultural importance given to marriage ceremonies.

I would like to discuss the main reasons for giving such importance to weddings in Azerbaijani society. To start with, wedding culture is an indispensable part of Azerbaijani culture. It is more than just a marriage contract reflecting the old traditions in ceremonies held to celebrate the beginning of the marriage (Tohidi, 1999). Although marriage is mostly referred to as a tradition rather than a necessity for Caucasus nations, including Azerbaijan, it is regarded as an important goal for youth (Roudik, 2009). Even for the ancient Turkman Turks, girls and boys should be married as soon as they reached maturity level, and for ancient Turks, marrying was equal to establishing the house -"*yuva qurdum*" (Məmmədova, 2018). It is worth mentioning that family is referred to as an institution preserving the traditions of the Caucasus, which is why Roudik (2009) emphasizes it to be at the core of protecting people from cultural assimilation.

The Marriage ceremony in Azerbaijan has its own specific traditions. The process is divided into three main stages: a) the preliminary stage, where a selection of a bride and other negotiatory processes are made; b) the wedding, where the main celebrations are conducted and finally; c) after-wedding customs (Yusifova, 2005; Putzi, 2008; Yalçın-Heckmann, 2001; Məmmədova,2018). Interestingly these stages are not endemic to Azerbaijan only, but other Caucasian nations practice similar customs where those three stages are observed (Roudik, 2009). The pre-wedding stage starts by the time when the groom's family is convinced to visit the future bride's family for permission to marry their daughter. After that, the wife-giver family demands some '*başlıq*'<sup>3</sup> from the wife-taker family. Then dowry collection process starts, where the main purpose is to ensure that the future wife has everything she needs, which is concluded by two

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<sup>3</sup> Money given to bride's family for wedding preparations, dowry etc.

separate wedding ceremonies: the bride's wedding and the groom's wedding, and Islamic marriage performed by a local mullah (Yalçın-Heckmann, 2001). I want to emphasize the Henna ceremony<sup>4</sup> practiced before the groom's wedding. Putzi, in her article, remarks Henna ceremony is a custom marking transition from girlhood to womanhood (2008). Girls like doing the Henna in their hands to show off that someone in their close relative or friend is getting married and soon there will be a wedding ceremony. Also, Məmmədova, in her article, while describing the wedding traditions of Turkic people, touches upon the age of Henna tradition lasting to centuries as it was mentioned in "*Kitabi Dada-Gorgud*" too.<sup>5</sup> This ceremony is usually held in the second stage of the marriage process, surrounded by other women singing (poem-like wrangling, debating, singing among women), and making the bride-to-be cry at the end (Məmmədova, 2018). Considering the above-mentioned ceremonies and rituals concerning the wedding process, it was a very costly and demanding part of life. However, during the Soviet times, the ideology of assuring equality in different policies was exercised. One of the policies was "red weddings," which promoted the simplest wedding parties, excluding the luxurious part, which Azerbaijanis enjoyed (McDowell, 1974). It had implications in each society, including Azerbaijan, where the number of separate bride and groom weddings decreased by combining the two parties (Yalçın-Heckmann, 2001). Pre-wedding traditions have evolved throughout the years. Under Soviet rule Azerbaijani approach to dating was somehow impacted, still families don't welcome girls dating and interacting with men. However, it has changed with the introduction of online platforms and chatting systems where girls can interact with guys without breaking traditional norms (Putzi, 2008).

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<sup>4</sup> This is all women traditional bachelorette party.

<sup>5</sup> The Book of Dede Gorgud (*Kitabi-Dada Qorqud*) is a heroic epic poem of the Oghuz – a Turkic tribal group who were the ancestors of the Azerbaijanis, Turks, Turkmens and the Gagauz. In terms of its historical and cultural significance, this saga is a grand testament to the culture of the Turkic world of ancient and medieval times (Rzasoy, 2010).

According to Tohidi (1999), although Azerbaijani society was considered a modern society where love was considered important, traditional practice of the spouse choice was still supervised by family members to choose the bride fully meeting certain requirements such as being a virgin before the wedding, high education, beauty standards, home-making skills and loyalty. The other issue harming the secular/modern nature of Azerbaijan was raising the issue of polygamy and bigamy to be restored after the dissolution of the Soviets and the first Karabakh war. The society which holds marriage and family as central elements permitted some religious groups to raise the issue of restoration of polygyny to help single women (Tohidi, 1999). The issue has been touched upon by Putzi, too, in her *A to Z World* book series. She states that Polygamy and bigamy were abolished under Soviet laws. The same argument is given by Darsky, too, that although individual cases were observed, majorly polygamy disappeared under the USSR rule (1994). After the dissolution in the late 1990s, and early 2000s due to economic difficulties, many Azerbaijanis were migrating Russia to find jobs (Yalçın-Heckmann, 2001). Some of the men moving to one of the Independent States ended up having another family there, which is against the Criminal Code of Azerbaijan. Sometimes, practices justified it to fall in line with Islamic laws (Putzi, 2008). This is an important aspect of the marriage emerged in literature review and it needs to be further studied in terms of how people perceive it, however, it goes beyond the scope of my study and it did not appear in the narratives of women I interviewed.

## **External Context**

### *Cultures that have been in interaction with Azerbaijan*

#### *1. Islam*

Arab conquest in the 7th century and the introduction of Islam are seen to have unifying power among Turkic and non-Turkic speakers, by introducing the common religion, language, and traditions in Azerbaijan. Thanks to this influence, there was a condition for the creation of common music, science, art, and literature (Zardabli, 2004). Najafizadeh (2012) also argued a similar argument, Islam being the element to create a collective sense of belonging for Azerbaijanis.

Aydemir (2013) argues that Turks after the Islamic invasion kept their traditions and lifestyles even if they were not appropriate with Islamic values. After becoming Muslims, the geographical area inhabited by Turks grew and due to different political and economic structures the changes happened at different levels for Turkic societies. There was also another argument that Islam was a latecomer and was alien to Turkish culture. The same idea is argued earlier in the book by referring to Koroghlu and Dede Gorgud dastans which contain both Islamic and pre-Islamic traditions and values in it. It is argued that Islamic traditions are just layers of them adopted after the adoption of Islam in the area (Altstadt, 1992).

It is interesting to mention that although many post-Soviet countries had Muslim identities, not all of them shared a common culture or values. As Motika argues (2001) in different republics Islam was shaped by their circumstances rather than international Islamic movements, which is the case for Azerbaijan, as well. A similar idea of different Islamic approaches in Azerbaijan was also stated by Nayereh Tohidi (2002), where she describes the attitude of the average Azeri woman toward veiling. “In June 1992, when a delegation of 22 Islamist women headed by Zehra Mostafavi, daughter of Khomeini, visited Baku, Azerbaijan, wrapped in heavy chadors in the heat of summer,

they were met with stares and disdainful reactions everywhere they went. On one occasion, a middle-aged Azeri woman asked, ‘Do not you feel hot under this heavy black garment in this hot summer?’ ‘But the fire in hell is much hotter if one fails to follow Allah’s orders,’” one of the Iranians replied. Baffled by her response the Azeri woman mumbled, “What a cruel God you have! The Allah that I know is much kinder to women” (Tohidi, 2002).

Today’s reality according to a survey conducted among youth by Mammadli (2018), youth are less active in religious rites with 45% of respondents aged 18-35 declaring themselves as not participating in any religious rituals at all. The interesting issue raised by Mammadli (2018) was the ability of religious ideas to grow after the dissolution of the Soviets despite the decades-long applied atheist policies. Najafizadeh’s argument (2012) about “When the ideological vacuum was created and Islam was the one to fill this vacuum and provides the guidance in life” more or less explains the answer to this raised question. To dive deeper into this issue, we may look at literature analyzing the survival of Islam under Russian rule.

In the 20th century, Azerbaijan went through the emergence of new religious tendencies together with the search for national identity. During those times, people tend to identify themselves as Muslims (Suleymanli, 2021). This issue can be brought to attention during the mass massacres committed by Armenians against Azerbaijanis too. 1905-1906 remained in the memories of people as an Armenian-Muslim war rather than the Azerbaijani nation itself (Mammadli, 2018). That depicts the idea of Islam being dominant in different spheres of public life (Mubarizli, 2021). However, it is also worth mentioning that what is associated as dominant Muslim traditions were not welcomed by people, including women. An example could be the *Mulla Nasraddin* journal of 19<sup>th</sup> century which contrasted veiled Muslim women and educated English women. Interestingly journal depicts veils as men’s control over women. It is interesting to mentioned that another not

welcomed side of dominant Muslim traditions by intelligentsia in the 20th century was Arabic alphabet which was considered to symbolize Islam and its civilization was not preferred over the Roman alphabet (it symbolized the Western and Turkic links) (Ergun, 2010).

Islam trying to survive under the Soviet empire did not exist in organized, institutionalized political entity but rather existed more as a cultural field. To explain, people were afraid to identify themselves as religious but in their daily lives they kept the values of Islam by sharing the same cultural traditions, and history (Taştan, 2003). Cultural change is past dependent, meaning Islam left its cultural heritage. Although in modern days not many people attend churches or mosques but these people remain distinctive for their cultural patterns (Inglehar, 2000). Taştan (2003) argues that the survival of Islam owes to Muslim Institutions back in the Soviet time, where they tried to simplify Islamic practices under new circumstances and adapt them to new realities with secular ideas. Considered part of the population's daily lifestyle, such as funeral ceremonies, 3, 7, and 40 days of it, Friday gatherings all are examples Islamic values that integrated into daily lifestyles and by this integration it could survive. Due to some economic difficulties, there was decrease in those tradition lately, but a commemoration of the 1st, 3rd, 7th, and 40th days after death, as well as every Thursday between the burial and the 40th, are common traditions that still exist, and in each of these gathering Mullah should be present (Balci, 2014).

A similar argument approving the survival of Islam is given by Najafizadeh (2012) too. For example, during the Soviet times, when the practice of religion in public was banned, Azerbaijani families practiced Namaz by closing the curtains at home, or during the funeral ceremonies the Mullah was invited privately (Najafizadeh, 2012). These traditions were practiced within the families and passed to young generations from their families, showing the important role of the family in preserving cultural identity. According to Bruner certain practices of nations will persist

only if it has integrated into the lifestyle by some means (1956). For Azerbaijan it was Islam, and for centuries religious influences of Islam got interwoven with other cultural practices of Azerbaijan (Najafizahed, 2012). Today, 'Id al-Adha and 'Id al-Fitr are national holidays in Azerbaijan and officially they are non-working days for people. The annual commemoration of 'Ashura<sup>6</sup> as well as among the events related to the Muslim Shi'i identity of the majority of Azerbaijanis. It must be mentioned that even weddings are not held during the month of Muharram when Ashura falls (Balci, 2014).

## 2. *Russian element*

Some Turkish researchers argue that Turks are one of the oldest civilizations and Russians were the ones to divide them (Suvvari, 2012).

Tsarist influence: Tsarist Russia regarded the conquest of the Caucasus as a "civilizing mission" since the people living here and their culture were "backward" (Mostashari, 2005; Stern, 1994; Altstadt, 1992; Altsadts, 2016). But this conquest and Russian civilizing mission was not welcomed by everyone, and there were opposing opinions such as Chaadaev who engaged in discussion over Russian identity and its historical context. He questioned what the conquest of Asia meant if Russia was not a Western country. Nicholas I created *the Doctrine of Official Nationality* to refute this notion. While visiting the Caucasus, members of the Imperial Senate declared their intentions to convert the locals to Russian culture and to place the cross of Christ atop the remains of Islam (Altstadt, 2016).

Russians claimed local people to be savage and also did not trust the Muslims living in Azerbaijan. Thus, the policy was designed to Russify them and assimilate them into Russian culture. One of the tools for this was education. They opened new Russian schools (although they sometimes failed

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<sup>6</sup> for Shia Muslims it is a major religious commemoration of the martyrdom at Karbala of Hussein, a grandson of the Prophet Muhammad.

due to the existence of local teachers who had deep cultural memory and religious beliefs (Altstadt, 2016)). The other one was by changing the demographic composition. For instance, Gulustan, Turkmenchai treaties where the majority of Sunni Muslims moved to the Ottoman or Iran, and Christians living in Armenia moved to the Russian Empire changing the demographic composition in the Caucasus (Mostashari, 2005).

Accordingly, the control over Caucasia was different that Russians tried to influence the religious and cultural values of local inhabitants. Russians had a great effect to control Turks with Christianization and Russification policies. With its discriminatory policies, Russians even tried to affect the religious and cultural spheres that are impossible to affect directly. However, the adoption of Russian culture was regarded as downgraded by some. The reason is that Azerbaijani Turks' inheritance of Turkish and Islamic culture had ancient history and cultural and historical ties with a lot of Asian empires (including Genghis Khan who ruled the Russians under his big empire) (Altstadt, 1992). However, it is argued that the Tsarist policy of modernization and industrialization was mainly affecting a small group of people who interacted with changing environments, such as those working in administration or as a merchant. The rest of the population lived in homogenous *mehelles*, and villages by speaking their own language (Altstadt, 1992).

The beginning of the 20th century is signified by the emergence of Azerbaijani intelligentsia who tried to preserve their own cultural heritage by appreciating Russian constitutionalism, and institutions of self-governance (Mostashari, 2005). Those intelligentsias were the ones to criticize society. One of the intelligentsias worth mentioning is Uzeyir Hajibeyli. The comic operettas by Uzeyir Hajibeyli such as "Arshin mal alan" (The Cloth Peddler) or "O olmasin, bu olsun"( If Not That One, Then This One), in the early 20th century were describing the lives of Muslim population in Azerbaijan under the Tsarist Empire. Arranged marriages were commonly spread

since it was not allowed for women to go outside without a veil and for men to meet women. Early marriage of women to older men for the material interests of the family was among the main things depicted by Hajibeyli.

Soviet influence: Soviet authorities tried to acculturate the different cultures in Union by transforming the body politic in accordance with anticapitalist, collectivist values and atheism (Shaw, 2011).

Although with its policies directed to acculturation, efforts of the Soviet to weaken or eradicate religious influence, Islam continued to play a prominent role in Azerbaijani culture. For many Azerbaijanis, Islam continued to play a private rather than public role in their lives (Najifazadeh, 2012). Compared to Tsarist influence Soviet policy and its approach to cultural life was different. The essence of Marxist policy was that the infernal status of anybody does not define their native abilities but rather their special role in production. With this in mind, Soviet policy towards minorities was different than Tsarist policy, where the main purpose was to foster division among people to maintain the dominance of Russia. Instead, Soviet policy had faith in minorities to contribute to art, literature, or other forms of social life (Stern, 1944). However, the similar approach of downgrading the other cultures persisted during the Soviets. Altstadt (2016) mentioned that one of the statements in 12th Party Congress in April 1923 was as follows: “No non-industrial or pre-industrial society's culture may be rated higher than an industrial one; Turkic or Persian Islamic culture must be ranked below Russian”. During the Soviet times, Islam was regarded as a leftover from the past, thus people were pressured not to visit mosques, synagogues, churches, etc., and people had to keep their beliefs private (Taştan, 2003). However, Soviet policy to influence the culture of Azerbaijanis was not limited to discouraging people from going to mosques. Soviet’s policy to influence the cultural memory of Azerbaijanis included the destruction

of the intelligentsia in the period of 1937-1938 where some sources claim the number of victims to be 120.000, as well as distorting their words, misinterpreting their intentions and their writings (Altstadt, 1992). Despite 70 years of strong Soviet ideology and lifestyle, the institution of marriage was less subjected to rapid change and retained its traditions for each culture and its ethnic feature (Darky,1995). The possible explanation to this could be quote by Meyer (1972): “being a member of a certain group transmits culture. Compared to political and economic realities, it either remains or changes gradually. Every culture is sui generis”. Tohidi (1998) also in her article touches upon the similar issue. She says, in colonial rule, family serves as resistance to assimilation and in the case of Azerbaijan, the domain of Islam to be protected from penetration. Positively, Russian influence is not limited to negativity only. Particularly, Russian influence on diminishing the Islamic religious ideology gave the chance for women to redefine their position in society by getting into the labor market, by discarding the veil (Najafizadeh, 2012).

The example of such can be seen in *Ahmad Haradadir?* (Where is Ahmad?), a famous Soviet-produced movie, directed by Adil Isgandarov. This movie is a good example for seeing the lifestyles in Soviet Azerbaijan as well as the wedding culture back then. The movie describes the differences between families in the village and Baku city, where in Baku city women are allowed to go to restaurants or have a boyfriend but in villages there is still practice of arranged marriage. In the village, two fathers want to arrange a marriage for their son and daughter but they refuse to get engaged and come to the city for education. After some interesting adventures of losing baggage, preparing for exams, these two fall in love and marry.

### *3.Turkish element*

The widespread Turkish culture is the one that predominates in Azerbaijan. Out of this, two distinct cultures developed: on the one hand, the Russian and Soviet culture, and on the other, the cultures

of the many ethnic groups residing in Azerbaijan, including the Kurds, Lezgians, and Talish. The two cultures—or, perhaps more accurately, their mutual knowledge of one another—have influenced Azerbaijan's culture (Tokluoglu, 2005). Historically, Turkish influence was felt by Azerbaijanis. However, it is interesting to note that historically population of Aran-Shirvan, Turkic-speaking inhabitants of northern parts of Iran had unstable relations with Ottoman Turks. Wars happening between them are also examples of such relations and the reason lying behind it was shown mainly Ottomans being Sunni and the former being Shii (Suvvari, 2012). But that does not mean that Azerbaijanis were reluctant to Turkic influence. The leaders of Azerbaijani intelligentsia in the 20th century were educated groups of people who had been to Europe, Russia, and mostly to Turkey for their education. (Altstadt, 1992). Additionally, Jeyhun bay Hajibayli, one of the intelligentsias of the 20th century criticized Azerbaijanis who surrendered themselves to European culture and downgraded their native and ancient Turkic culture (Altsadtd, 1992).

The increase in the level of influence of Turkish culture in Azerbaijani began after Azerbaijan regaining the independence. After regaining independence broadcasting from Turkey led to the infusion of Turkic culture as well as words to the Azerbaijani language (Altstadt,1992). Especially, Turkish music, movies, and TV shows symbolized something foreign unlike Russian and there was no other entertainment since Azerbaijani television stations have not been established yet (Musawi, 2018). Similar information was mentioned by Ismailzade (2006) and Salehi (2017) too, who emphasizes the popularity of Turkish pop music in those times, Turkish TV programs as well as an increased number of Turkish businessmen who easily invested in Turkic-speaking countries. Also, the early 1990s saw the introduction of the popularity of education in Turkey. Turkish lyceums and higher education institutions in Azerbaijan, were believed to offer high-quality education (Musawi, 2018). 15,000 Azerbaijani students were enrolled in Turkish universities in

2017, according to the Department for Migration of the Turkish Interior Ministry. In contrast, there are around 180,000 students enrolled in universities in Azerbaijan.

Nika Musavi, a writer and freelance journalist, mentioned in one of her articles (2018) that one of the reasons for the continuous influence of Turkish culture in Azerbaijan is the lack of dubbing and translations of books in Azerbaijani (not everyone understands Russian and English but at least they understand Turkish because of its similarity).

### *Regional context of wedding/marriage cultures*

Similar to case of Azerbaijan culture and traditions of other post-Soviet, Central-Asian countries were affected by Soviet policies. Mainly the countries carrying Turkic cores, from Caucasia and being Muslim have been analyzed for regional context part. To start with Putzi in their book of *A to z world lifecycles* (2008), defines the short overview of marriage and wedding culture of 175 countries. Among them I would like to overview some.

*Kazakhstan-* In Kazakhstan people are marrying later than 18 age after dating rather than parents arranging the marriage. Traditionally marriage is a bond between two families rather than just simply two people. By custom Kazakh groom asks bride's hand from her father and the process of negotiation named “kutaga tusu” lasts for 40 days. A dowry called *kalym* symbolizes engagement but it is not a necessity for modern families. For the Muslim community, the record of the marriage is filed in mosques. Russian Orthodox couples marry in church and eat from a bowl and share the same fur according to traditions. Stealing the bride is also a tradition followed by some tribes. It can be done in two ways either with the permission of the bride which is elopement or without it which can initiate new marriage. In terms of polygamy, there is no law restricting it, but it can be mostly seen in southern parts and in an elite class. Comparing the traditions of Kazakhstan, we

may see some similarities such as the role of mosques in Muslim's marriage, the meaning attached to marriage being more than knot between two individuals as well as kidnapping the bride. However, the specific 40 days negotiations before marriage is not observed among Azerbaijanis.

*Turkmenistan-* In Turkmenistan official marriage age is 18 but with the favor of parents or their arrangements people can marry at earlier ages. Child in the first year of marriage is very important and childlessness can cause divorce or polygamy. There is a practice of bride exchange too, where families give bride get groom or vice-versa. In this case, there is no need for a bride price too. There is an interesting tradition that the groom's family forcibly takes the bride to their house and persuades her to stay there. After her family's approval, she stays and sees the groom, otherwise, she refuses by not sitting or eating in their house. Before the wedding, Mullah examines whether the groom has more than three wives. In the ceremony, Mullah reads *fatkhu* and *hutbe* from the Koran, and a cup of tea covered with a handkerchief and coin in tied in the corner is given to the couple. Afterward, bride receives around 30kg of silver ornaments are given to the bride. According to Islamic traditions, new couple signs nikah, and an afterward religious ceremony are followed by a civil ceremony. After marriage bride returns to her paternal house only after 40 or 50 days of marriage and afterward they move to their own house. Although polygamy is not legal, it is common in Turkmenistan, especially among wealthy men. Only the first marriage is registered and the rest are conducted according to religious customs. In past years men could marry up until four times without the permission of their wives and these women usually were slaves brought from other countries but never Turkmen women. Before Turkmen avoided divorce 3-4 decades ago but now it is accepted as normal. A divorced woman can marry at least three menstrual periods after divorce. Looking into Turkmen traditions there are less similarities. To explain, the process

of agreement between families, also Mullah's important role are the ones that I did not come across with while studying the traditions of Azerbaijan

*Uzbekistan-* Dating is usually not common in Uzbekistan but Russian Catholics date before marriage. Arranged marriages are very popular there. It is usually the mother who has the final say to approve the groom or bride. Islamic traditions and ethnicity are very important for Uzbeks. After the engagement bread breaking marks the official engagement. The wedding ceremony takes place at the bride's home and religious rites are performed by *domla*, an elderly clergyman. *Kelin salomi* is another party thrown by the bride's family, which is related to Zoroastrianism since people worship the fire during the ceremony. Polygamy exists in Uzbekistan too, but only wealthy men marry more than one wife. Coming to similarities with Uzbekistan, the existence of arranged marriages and unacceptance of dating before marriage are among the similarities. However, interestingly in Azerbaijan, according to interview results, usually the final say for approving the groom or bride belongs to father rather than mother.

*Georgia-* Family approval is not necessary and people date or marry the one they want. However, a man can visit the bride's family to ask for her hand in marriage for the sake of formality. Wedding ceremonies take place in church and they circle the *artal* three times. Traditionally, parents do not attend the ceremony, and after the wedding bride's parents host a reception. As they arrive, they should stomp on a ceramic plate. Traditionally, the one who breaks will be dominant in the family. In some regions, it is traditional for men to steal the bride. It is usually elopement but in some occasions, it may happen without the consent of women too. Georgian tradition of parents not attending the wedding ceremony was the common things that I heard during the interviews with women. In Azerbaijan also there is a common practice of bride's parents hosting a reception after

the wedding. Also stomping the ceramic plate tradition as well, very commonly spread among all the regions of Azerbaijan.

*Turkey-* Dating is happening in Turkish society but conservative families do not let their daughters date men. The official marriage age is 18 but younger people can also marry their parent's consent. Wedding ceremonies are usually conducted in worship places but a civil ceremony is also legally required. Accordingly, 50% of weddings are both civil and religious, 40% are only civil, and 10 % are only religious. The most commonly practiced tradition is bride price. The bride usually wears a silk wedding dress with a red cape. Bride's family creates a trousseau and decorates it with gold coins. Henna Night (*Kina Gecesi*) before the wedding day is also an important ritual. The celebrations include religious prayers, and signing religious and civil matrimony. Comparing Turkey's tradition, we may see that in Azerbaijan also majority of marriages are both civil and religious contracted only religious contracted marriages having the smallest portion. Also bride price and Henna Night, red cape are among the common similarities including the families being conservative.

Werner (2018) brings up an interesting discussion about bride kidnapping in post-Soviet Eurasia where she argues for Armenians, Azerbaijanis, Chechens, Georgians, Karakalpaks, Kazakhs, and Kyrgyzstan, it is one of the paths of marriage that perpetuates unequal power relations in society. While Soviet policies impacted women's lives positively in terms of accessibility of jobs, education, and bride kidnapping was illegal and is still illegal, some people keep exercising this practice as a cultural tradition.

After overview of how marriage process is conducted and how similar, different they are we may look on more focused studies on wedding culture on post-soviet countries, especially changes brought by Soviet regime.

Dommaraju (2008) tries to study the changes in marriage in the post-Soviet period in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan. He argues that until the 1980s Russia's marriage age was low and the rate was high, however after the dissolution vice-versa is observed. Accordingly, it is hard to determine whether these changes are arising from cultural changes or structural conditions. Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan right after the dissolution of the Soviet Empire reached the peak marriages which is explained by the uncertainties existing in society (the inflation may influence prices of dowry). Late Soviet traditionalism rose in the societies and is also offered as a possible reason. However, the case was different for Kazakhstan where the almost stable term was observed right after the dissolution and it is explained by the fact of nearly half of the residents are Christian Russians.

Edgar (2007) touches upon those Turkmen who stayed in Soviet Turkmenistan had new changes in their life. For example, unlike their grandmothers or mothers young Turkmen women could pursue their education and careers. Even women living in remote villages attended the school. However, at the same time, Soviet authorities banned the traditions, and customs they were “backward”, such as polygamy, bridal exchange, bridal payment, and blood feud. Yet, Turkmen villagers continued their traditions, especially the ones related to weddings. Even today, young men pay the bride price, brides do not talk to their elder in-laws, and brides return to their parent’s homes after the period of gaitarma after the wedding.

Kamp (2007) in their article tries to explore the changes brought by Soviet through the help of story written by Soviet authors. In Uzbekistan, marriages were usually arranged in the 1930s and although the Communist party shared the idea to marry the one that they love, Uzbeks tried to find the golden age by arguing “do not marry against your will”. This means still parents guide the marriage but at least it is not forced. A very interesting story about Gulshad and Sabir is written,

where the author describes love happening between them but each meeting takes place in her Gulshad's house in the presence of her mother. Additionally as promoted by the Soviets to have an education first, Gulshad first completes her education in two years and then proceeds with the wedding. Although, usually Uzbeks preferred weddings between two major Muslim holidays Ramadan and Feast of Sacrifice, or near Novruz, in this story these two arranged weddings on the anniversary of the 1917 revolution- an important Soviet holiday. Her mother prepared her dowry, and furnisher but the Soviets attacked only one tradition of Uzbeks in this story which was qalin- payment of money or goods by the groom's family to the bride. Before Soviet times, Uzbeks used to live big celebrations of weddings for days with an abundant amount of food, but in this story, the couple discusses the details of weddings to eliminate excess spending which symbolizes the Communist idea of big celebrations being a waste of money. Also, the wedding is not described as "Old School" where women and men are separate but all together and a couple dances the rhumba and foxtrot at the end.

Michael (2007) touches upon the case of Kazakhstan. In Kazakhstan majority were Muslim, but the infusion of alcohol into the Kazakh diet and the presence of Slavs changed the traditions of Kazakhs. Although Islam prohibits the consumption of alcoholic drinks, no wedding ceremony was imagined without alcohol and the toasts made with it after Soviet policies. For Kazakhs hospitality, the ability to make wedding ceremonies in a valish way was a tradition that was kept during Soviet rule. But in the Post-Soviet period with economic difficulties, it was harder to find food and it impacted the ease of the celebrations that were made.

## CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

### *Culture, Cultural Identity and Cultural Memory*

To start with Culture as defined by Geertz (1973) is not an occult entity, it is unphysical but does not exist in someone's head. To understand science or as given in this study culture, one should interpret it other than to describe. For example, as suggested by Geertz (1973), two boys constantly contracting the eyelids of their right eye can be interpreted differently. Although two are identical movements, one is twitching the other is wink. A similar approach is also relatable for the interview results. Two different women not having traditional Azerbaijani wedding may look similar, but these two had different explanations for this. One defined it as a limitation imposed due to her commitments before government but the other interpreted it as modern style wedding being better than show-off luxury Azerbaijani weddings.

The other explanation to the culture as a concept I would like to bring quote by Goodenough (1957) "A society's culture consists of whatever it is one has to know in order to operate in a manner acceptable to its members. Culture is not a material phenomenon; it does not consist of things, people, behavior, or emotions. It is rather an organization of these things. It is the form of things that people have in mind, their models for perceiving, relating, and otherwise interpreting them" (Goodenough, 1957 in Keesing, 1974). Following this definition, we may argue that culture is adopted through observing the surroundings. In the same article Keesing (1974) bring the quote by Meggers (1971) who argues that men like animals should adopt the surrounding realities in order to survive and this adoption is done through culture. Relating to this particular study, it is quite natural for women to adopt into the realities they were surrounded by. It particularly explains the differences between women who worked for government and women who were living an ordinary life in other regions of Azerbaijan. The ones surrounded by Soviet officials, in order to

survive had to follow the new realities and requirement of the dominant political structure who formed the new realities. Thus, Aliya, Valida and Taliya adopted to new realities and were quite successful in their careers. The main tool to help to transfer the culture through generations is seen to be family, especially mother line, as the guardian of culture (Tohidi, 1999). Various authors have defined the concept of cultural identity in distinct ways. According to Warburg and Halbwachs in Assman (1995), cultural identity is not inherited genetically but is instead the product of socialization and customs. This suggests that family and society greatly influence the formation of a person's cultural identity. As Assmann (1995) noted, common elements such as rituals, ceremonies, and traditions unite individuals under a shared cultural identity while also serving as factors that differentiate them. Paleczny (2008) also highlights the importance of these common elements in shaping cultural identity, further emphasizing their role in defining cultural boundaries. By bringing together these perspectives, it can be understood that cultural identity is a complex and dynamic construct shaped by various social and cultural factors such as region, class, education, population density, and political system. While there is a dominant cultural identity that is depicted, each circumstance an individual is surrounded by may have a direct impact on shaping a person's cultural identity in unique ways. This is why, in this study, the explanation for some of the respondents of similar age and similar background have a different understanding of wedding culture. Some were different due to coming from different regions and others because of their education level, occupation of their families and their proximity to government. The current way these people identify themselves has passed through challenging stages. According to Connerton's concept of "act of transfer" (1989 in Hirsch and Smith 2002), the formation of identity by individuals and groups in the present is deeply influenced by their shared history and the norms, conventions, and practices that have prevailed over time, often with ongoing disputes. This process

of identity formation involves a complex interplay between various factors, including the past and present, the individual and the group, the public and the private, memory and forgetting, power and helplessness, history and myth, trauma and nostalgia, and conscious and unconscious fears or wants (Hirsch and Smith, 2002). This idea again reaffirms the previously stated argument that each small element in the life of those women had a significant impact on the formulation of their identities.

In this context, cultural memory plays a crucial role, as it reflects the fragmented personal and collective experiences expressed through different technologies and media that convey memory and shape it. Hirsch and Smith (2002) noted that cultural memory is always mediated. As such, it represents a dynamic interplay between individual and collective experiences and the broader social and cultural context in which they occur. To explain, the cultural memory of interview participants in this study involved different time frames. The cultural memory of theirs belongs to Soviet times whereas, they narrated it to me in different time. Thus, the way memories were narrated to me reflected the personalities of those women which evolved throughout their life, including the impact of today's realities. That could be the explanation of Aliya mentioning the success of her career path more and regret her decision to marry overall. It could be that she was happy while getting married back then, but her experiences, the realities of her life ended up on her regret which was expressed during the interview while sharing the memories of past times.

### *Intersectionality and Cultural Domain of Power*

The concept of intersectionality, introduced by Crenshaw (1991) who described identity politics by arguing that social power is excluding those who are different. One source of problem is seen in the fact that identity politics ignores intra-group differences which results in tensions among the

groups (Crenshaw, 1991). Thus, we can give the definition to intersectionality as “the notion that subjectivity is constituted by mutually reinforcing vectors of race, gender, class” (Nash, 2008). This means differences exist across and within groups. Each individual represents an identity constituted and designed by intersection of social categories such as race, gender, class etc. To dive deeper on the topic and understanding the power relations existing in society, the domain-of-power concept explained by Collins (2019) introduces four main elements one of them being cultural domains. Accordingly, social institutions and practices produce the hegemonic ideas that justify social inequalities or counter-hegemonic ideas that criticize unjust social relations (Collins, 2019). In other words, what cultural aspects will gain prominence and demonstrated, which ones are given acceptance and which ones are discouraged from publicly displayed are decided by who holds the power over the cultural domain.

Combining these two definitions shed light on the complex and unique cultural identity of Azerbaijanis and in what ways certain cultural practices were apparent while others continued without public visibility. This is because the typical Azerbaijani individual is the result of an intersection of various cultural and historical influences, such as Islam, the Tsarist Empire, Soviet culture, European culture, and Turkish culture along with local practices of different regions. Therefore, as Collins (2019) stated hegemonic ideas produced by social institutions in different time frames over Azerbaijanis created the unique cultural identity. Purkayastha (2012) notes that it is possible to belong to both a majority and minority group simultaneously, and this can be a helpful framework for understanding the experiences of Azerbaijanis. They were considered the majority in a multinational country while also being perceived as a minority by the dominant Russians and the Russian culture that has been imposed on them. As a result, many studies have reported on the confusion among local Azerbaijanis when identifying themselves as members of a

particular group which is analyzed in the literature review of this study. All these impacts had a specific mark on the cultural formation of Azerbaijanis. As the interviewees born during the Soviet Empire and having more knowledge of those days, we can analyze how complex and rich Azerbaijani culture was influenced by the Soviet culture and how the lifestyle was shifted in this era. As the people in this study were one of the last generations of living and marrying in Soviet times, what they transferred to new generations and how they understood their culture is important. Shifts in wedding practices described by the participants of the interview, such as religious practices changing, traditional ceremonies getting eliminated, having modest weddings without luxury elements in it, indicate a cultural domain of power mentioned by Collins (2019) which shows the marks of Soviet expectations. While there are intersections of these multiple cultures, the time period under investigation here indicates a strong presence of Soviet regime which makes it relevant to look at the concept of “acculturation”. Acculturation refers to the process of integrating two cultures while adapting to the society's dominant culture. This involves a range of social, psychological, and cultural transformations as individuals negotiate and navigate the tensions and complexities of different cultural norms and expectations (Jacob, 2020). In the case of the Soviet regime, acculturation played a crucial role in integrating various nationalities under the umbrella of the USSR, intending to promote the mutual enrichment of national cultures (Rorlich, 1982). However, as noted by Shaw (2011), the main aim of the Soviet governors was to create a common Soviet culture by using acculturation tools to promote specific values and beliefs, such as anticapitalism, atheism, and collectivism. Various mechanisms targeted these values, including education, propaganda, and socialization. While acculturation can be seen as a means of promoting cultural understanding and integration, in this case, it was used as a tool for political control and homogenization. Another concept explaining the Soviet policy is Culture Wars. The

concept of "culture wars" was introduced by As Altstadt (1994) to explain the impact of Soviet policy towards minorities on Azerbaijani culture. The main objective was to create a unified culture for the entire USSR, which was applied across the union. As part of this policy, efforts were made to develop proletarian literature, which had a lasting impact on the destruction of native cultures by involving local artists in organizations such as the Union of Proletarian Writers and the Union of Soviet Artists (Altstadt, 1994). Coming to exact policy of the Soviets for weddings other than discouraging religious practices was the promotion of "red weddings." Shilovskaia (2020) notes that the traditional wedding ceremony underwent significant changes during the Soviet era. The "red wedding" featured a simple dress code for the bride and groom, modest decorations, and a small celebration with like-minded individuals. The event was designed to be more of a socio-political affair than a family event, with contracts signed over and parents being absent. Interestingly, the interviewees in this study also placed a high value on simple weddings without unnecessary luxury items. Still, it was observed that families with closer ties to the central government were more likely to adhere to this "red wedding" style compared to those living in other regions of Azerbaijan. Thus, I may argue that domination in cultural spheres does not necessarily eliminate the local cultural elements, which is also confirmed by the data obtained from interviews with older generation.

### *Cultural Violence*

To explain cultural violence, I would like to start by quoting Galtung (1990):

The study of cultural violence highlights the way in which the act of direct violence and the fact of structural violence are legitimized and thus rendered acceptable in society. One way cultural violence works is by changing the moral color of an act from red/wrong to green/right or at least to yellow/acceptable; an example being 'murder on behalf of the country as right, on behalf of oneself wrong (292).

It can be argued that the Soviet policy imposed similar direct and structural violence on Azerbaijanis, by imposing the idea that traditional Azerbaijani weddings are wrong but Soviet style weddings are right as Galtung would explain, leading to cultural violence. This is evident from the interviewee's account, where she expressed fear of having a traditional wedding ceremony due to their affiliation with the Soviet government. This imposition of a different culture, and the acceptance of it as natural and right, can be seen as cultural violence. Moreover, the concept of conformity further explains this phenomenon, where individuals conform to a single standard of the behavior despite having different underlying preferences (Bernheim, 1994). This is evident from the interviewee's statement, where she expressed her love for traditional wedding preparations but ultimately had to follow the simple wedding due to the circumstances surrounding her. Thus, the imposition of Soviet culture resulted in the erasure and suppression of the Azerbaijani culture, leading to cultural violence.

Cognitive dissonance theory, Leon Festinger (1962), posits that individuals may experience dissonance when encountering new information or experiences contradicting their belief system. The cognitive dissonance process involves deciding which information to accept, the old or the new. In this study, one respondent repeatedly emphasized their atheism while acknowledging the importance of religious practices in their wedding preparations. This contradiction can be explained through cognitive dissonance theory, as the introduction of atheism represents new information that must be integrated into the respondent's belief system. As Collins and Nickel (1975) explain, individuals seek to attain a more accurate understanding of reality by testing new information for accuracy and integrating tested segments into their belief systems. In this case, the new information she obtained contradicts her existing knowledge of the religious marriage contract.

Despite all these difficulties, the old wedding traditions of Azerbaijan could survive. The study reveals that despite the cultural war exercised on the culture of Azerbaijanis, most of the elements managed to survive until today, including religious practices. According to Bruner's (1956) observations, the existence of certain principles can explain why certain cultural practices may resist assimilation despite the infusion of new cultural practices by a dominant power. Applying these principles to the context of cultural practices in Azerbaijan, it is possible to argue that certain religious traditions, such as having a religious marriage contract, have become an integral part of marriage ceremonies, even in the face of people's mistrust of religious authorities. This practice may be an example of the principle of integration.

In contrast, the tradition of dowry may be seen as a reflection of the principle of utility, as it continues to be practiced due to the practical necessity of providing newlyweds with the resources to start a new family, even though the Soviet government discouraged the extravagant celebrations that often-accompanied weddings. However, some cultural practices may lose their functionality over time, eventually eliminating them. An example of this is the tradition of "üzəçıxdı," which involves the bride staying at home for three days after the wedding. This practice has lost its function in modern times, as the dynamic nature of life makes it impractical and unnecessary.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employs standpoint theory as its methodological approach. How people position themselves will be elaborated through narrative approach. This study acknowledges the situation of oppressed groups, as argued by Harding (2004), stating that the dominant group's privileged position enables them to generate a unique kind of knowledge and insist on distinct material conditions for themselves and those whose labor facilitates their dominance. In order to move away from dominant and see the silenced cultural practices, I focused on cultural memories of people. Through face-to-face interviews, the study aims to recollect the wedding preparation traditions through the memories of the older generation people in Azerbaijan. Cultural memory has been defined differently in the literature, and this study adopts Hirsch's approach (2002), which describes cultural memory as a present act in which individuals and organizations form their identities by recalling a shared past based on shared and frequently disputed standards, and practices. The study intends to investigate how the dominant Soviet culture impacted the lives of Azerbaijanis, specifically exploring how the dominant politics influenced the culture without blocking it but rather guiding it, as proposed by Harding (2004). To dive deep into the stories of people, the study adopts a narrative approach by listening to the "truth narratives" of the interviewees, as proposed by Porter (2007; also see Ozkaleli and Yilmaz 2015). Through this approach, the study aims to discover different perceptions of history through the lenses of various respondents, reflecting the unique elements of memory and the social background which they belong. The study also understands the culture of the community, shared understandings of identity, power, history, and values as a language of a particular society (Senehi 2002). This suggests that one person might have multiple voices, highlighting the importance of analyzing the

condition under which the person is talking during the interviews (Shostak, 1981 in Reinharz 1992). It highlights the importance of focusing into the subjective opinion of each interviewer during the process which was also suggested by Verstehen theory of Weber. In order to gain deeper understanding of social life and cultures of those times as Weber suggested in his Verstehen (Tucker, 1965), as a researcher I engaged directly with the people preserving those memories. In other words, one needs to put himself/herself “in the shoes” of researched subject to be able to comprehend at the level of the actor. To understand the actor, one should look into subjective meaning that each actor attaches into their behavior. Thus, to understand the position of the interviewees the focus was given to dive deeper into their memories to understand their subjective position in the stories. I aspired to reach the memories of participants to ask them questions that encouraged them to talk about the segments of their life in detail. Storytelling is a collaborative process that facilitates the creation of meaning. It is easily accessible, requiring no literacy or prior experience (Senehi, 2002). Since the research aims to include participants from diverse backgrounds, including those with different levels of education and experience, the questions were direct, clear and simple. Semi-structured, in-depth interviews were used to enable extended interaction with participants, allowing for a better understanding of their perspectives. These interviews do not require any special tools or knowledge by the participant, making them accessible to all (Holstein & Gubrium, 1995).

Interviews are usually assessed for reliability and validity to ensure objectivity in the data. However, in this study, which focuses on dynamic and meaning-making processes, reliability is not applicable. The aim is not to replicate answers, but to understand how meaning is constructed. To achieve this, it is important to separate the "knower" from what they know and to consider the influence of interests and biases (Smith, 2004). In order to ensure the validity of this research the

interview questions were designed in a way to cover the different aspects of the wedding rituals. The questions were relevant to extract information about different practices they followed, what meaning they attached to it and if they distance themselves for certain practices what their reasons were. Additionally, I made sure that interviewees felt comfortable, so they could share all their memories with me and let them talk about anything related to my study so that I can reach my goal. As a researcher, I aspired to be attentive to both the questions asked during the interview and the subsequent analysis.

The creation of meaning depends on how actions and context are connected. Therefore, contextualizing the participants' experiences by starting from their earlier life is helpful in interviews for locating the participant as a subject (Özkaleli and Yilmaz, 2015). In this study I started by asking their childhood memories in order to locate the individuals in their cultural setting and circumstances.

To accomplish my objective, I interviewed 7 older generation women who provided insights into past and present wedding customs. According to literature review, main customs done in wedding preparation are circled around brides, which makes women as a bride the central figure of the wedding customs. That was the main intention behind directing the focus to women for interviews for this study. Purposive sampling not only targeted women but also women from certain age group that could reflect practices during the Soviet times. I also followed snowballing methods to select 7 participants. Firstly, as a researcher I have asked my close acquaintances for permission of their old grandmothers, who I was certain will be willing to talk to me. It was followed by suggestion of those old generation women who introduced me to their close friends. I intentionally approached close acquaintances to introduce me to study participants because if the gatekeepers ensure the trustworthiness of the researcher, the interviewees would react more favorably. I wanted

these women feel comfortable with who they were talking. Considering the fact that I am interested in their private life it was very important that they trusted me. Reinharz (1992) found that people are more comfortable talking to those who have credibility in their community or social network, and therefore, I leveraged personal connections to gain access to older adults aged 70 years or older. In this study, the interview questions were semi-structured to focus on narratives and memories to encourage dialogue and allow the interviewees to participate in the knowledge-producing process (Ozkaleli and Yilmaz 2015). This approach is in line with Brinkman's (2018) assertion that semi-structured interviews can elicit more knowledge than structured interviews. The sample size of the study was not predetermined since the study is pilot study. Further I am intending to work on this study and develop it by widening its scope .Due to the limited number of participants and it is a qualitative study, the present study does not intend to draw generalizable or causal conclusions. Rather, the focus is on gaining a detailed and comprehensive understanding of how the individuals interviewed experienced weddings as a cultural phenomenon during the Soviet era in order to give us access to practices and meanings attached to these practices. However, overall goal for the future is to achieve theoretical saturation, as suggested by Beitin (2012), by interviewing as many people as possible.

The target group was chosen based on their experience living through both the Soviet Empire and Independent Azerbaijan, each of the women being from different regions of Azerbaijan, as well as the possibility that they may recall their parents' stories from the pre-Soviet period. One potential challenge of the study was the possibility that interviewees may forget certain elements of their stories. Assmann (2008) argues that forgetting is a natural part of the dynamics of individual memory and that forgotten memories do not necessarily mean they are lost forever. Assmann also notes that the function of the archive provides a counterbalance against the reductive and restrictive

drive of working memory, thereby creating a second-order memory that preserves what has been forgotten. In recalling forgotten memories, Hirsch (2002) suggests forming a meaningful narrative sequence rather than recalling events in isolation. Therefore, while interviewing, even though some women were talking out of the topic, I did not intervene, so that they could repair the chain of knowledge and eventually recall way more memories about my question. In analysis part the direct quotes by the participants were used to give deeper insight to the readers. Also, in order to add to the oral history of wedding rituals, I retained the Azerbaijani segments in the interviews as well for other researchers in Azerbaijani language to benefit from it.

To analyze the data I categorized the data by each question and compared the answer of each respondent to each other for understanding the possible similarities and difference that each women possessed. The following step was to code the data by colors which identified the possible concepts that each response referred to.

### *Author Positionality*

During my formative years, I attended first an Azerbaijani school and following an English-speaking University and did not encounter any Russian influences in education. However, my family members often reminisced about their experiences during the Soviet era, sharing phrases such as "During the Soviet time we had..." and relishing some Russian cuisine, music, and artists. Both my parents were born and grew up in the USSR Azerbaijan and witnessed the process of Azerbaijan's regaining independence in the 1990s. While my family members identify as Muslims, they do not practice religious practices such as prayer, mosque attendance, or Ramadan fasting. However, they do follow some Islamic rituals during wedding and funeral rituals, such as bringing the deceased body to the mosque first, inviting a Mullah to the funeral, and performing religious

marriage contract before the official marriage contract. Thus, coming from different cultural intersections I am interested in rediscovering the cultural elements of Azerbaijan and exploring the factors that influenced the formation of Azerbaijani culture from the early Soviet era to the present day (2023). Since wedding customs are an essential way for people to express their cultural identity and a common tradition experienced by the majority, I intend to focus on studying the changes in Azerbaijani wedding traditions, examining any potential interruptions and the role of Islam in these transformations. When I am interviewing older generation, my social location is a young female adult with dominant English language education who grew up with reflections of both Azerbaijani and Russian cultural elements in her familial background. This positionality made women perceive me as a modern young girl who is aware of the practices and words that they are talking about. The reason is that while talking, some paused and mentioned that “you would definitely know that you are well-educated girl”. Some were surprised when I asked about some details of the particular traditions with thought that I was supposed to know all of these better than they do by telling “do not you know it?”. It is worth noting that despite the significant age difference between myself and the women participants whom I interviewed, which could have potentially limited their willingness to share their candid thoughts due to a perceived power dynamic between the researcher and the interviewee (Ozkaleli & Yilmaz, 2013), we were able to overcome this obstacle. It was possible to overcome such an obstacle because in our culture older women are more comfortable in giving advice to younger generation, they see this people as their daughters like (cf. Ozkaleli and Yilmaz, 2013). This allowed for a more comprehensive and nuanced exploration of their experiences, as individuals tended to be more forthcoming and express their genuine thoughts to me. There were also some advice to me to continue my career on this field and they even made sure to stress that after marriage I should not quit my job. Furthermore, this highlights the advocacy of older

Azerbaijani women towards the continuation of young women's careers even after marriage, as well as their strong interest in promoting greater female representation in the labor market and the advancement of women within Azerbaijani society.

### *Ethics*

The method for conducting interviews in this study involves face-to-face interactions with participants, with strict protocols in place to ensure their privacy and confidentiality. No visual recording took place, but with participant consent, voice recording was conducted. Participants were fully informed of the study's purpose, institutional information, that the study is for master's thesis for completion of a degree, and the types of questions they will be asked. Also, before the interview they were asked to provide their consent to participate. Interviewees' identities will be kept confidential throughout the study to ensure their privacy and the names used to describe women are pseudonyms.

### *Limitations of the study*

The study was conducted within a limited time frame, which restricted the amount of data that could be collected and analyzed. As a result, only seven participants were interviewed, which is not an ideal number for qualitative research. Ideally, the study should have reached the saturation point in interviewee responses, but this was not possible due to the time constraint. Therefore, it is important to consider this study as a pilot study, and further studies based on these findings should consider increasing the number of participants and including people who continued living in the regions.

It is worth noting that this study focused on women living in Baku city. Although they were born and raised in other regions which gives the study diversity, the final living stage for all of them

was in Baku. This commonality may have resulted in bias in the study's findings, as people's perception of certain traditions may differ in Baku than in other regions. For instance, one of the respondents highlighted the absence of Russian language teachers in one of the regions, which was considered essential in schools and monitored in Baku city. This finding pointed out the significant impact that this element might have on the outlook of these students and directly relate to people's perception of their surroundings.

The limited sources and time available for this study may also have affected the scope and depth of the research. Therefore, future studies could consider expanding the research to include a more diverse group of participants and conducting a more comprehensive analysis of the data. Despite these limitations, the findings of this study provide valuable insights into the lived experiences of women living in Baku city and can serve as a basis for further research.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Given Name	Age	Place of birth	A place where she was raised	A place where her wedding was	Age of marriage	Occupation
Leyla	76	Baku	Baku	Baku	20	Translator/Radio presenter
Valida	86	Baku	Baku	Baku	22-23	Komsomol/Teacher
Aliya	85	Shusha	Khankendi	Baku	30	Ministry of Agriculture
Esmira	73	Gadabay	Baku, Goychay,	Aghdam	21	Doctor
Mahbuba	90	Jalilabad	Jalilabad, Sabirabad, Baku	Baku	25	Tailor
Taliya	94	Quba	Baku	Baku	22-23	Dancer
Asmar	72	Nakhchivan	Nakhchivan	Nakhchivan	31	Nurse

Overall, I have interviewed 7 women from different regions of Azerbaijan with different backgrounds. As mentioned in the table two of them were in their 90s, two in their 80s and three in their 70s. It is noteworthy that respondents from various birth years in Soviet Azerbaijan shared similar experiences, although with different details. They all attended school, then university, began working, and got married. After marriage, they typically focused on their families, either by their own choice or due to pressure from their husbands. For example, Leyla in her stories told that she wanted to dedicate all of her attention to her children, that is why she quit the job. However, Aliya was complaining about her decision and said that there was no pressure by her husband, but she simply could not manage to work parallel to taking care of children. In case of Esmira, she did not want to quit her job, but her husband secretly signed a letter for leaving her job without her consent, that she got to learn after some time. Despite their similar experiences, each respondent had a unique story that revealed the realities and mindset of Soviet times. This study's analysis section will explore these interesting discoveries.

One of the findings was that the stories of these women reveal the Soviet education policy's accessibility for everyone, which was evident in their experiences. Although girls and boys had separate schools for a time, this policy was abolished. Interestingly, this policy was not uniformly applied throughout all regions. Valida, who was born and raised in Baku, reported attending a girls' school until the ninth grade, after which it was merged with a boys' school. She talked when the schools were separate it was always interesting for them to see what is happening in boys' school. Also, she says that after merging schools it was very interesting, since before it was too girly. In contrast, Taliya, six years older than Valida, did not mention anything about girls and boys attending separate schools but emphasized that not all Azerbaijani families allowed their daughters to attend dance school. Furthermore, the majority of students at that time in dance schools were

Russians and Armenians and Taliya was alone Azerbaijani there. Aliya, who was one year younger than Valida and grew up in the Khankendi region, did not recall attending a separate school, nor did Mahbuba, a 90-year-old who attended school in Jalilabad. None of the respondents mentioned being pressured by their families to attend school. The oldest respondent, born in the 1930s, was already aware of the importance of education and noted how her father wanted her daughter to become educated.

While the Soviet policy of education was successful, it is important to note the spread of atheistic ideology was not that successful. Several sources in my literature review mentioned that people practiced religion privately, which was confirmed by my respondents. For instance, Valida shared that her father worked for the Soviet government, while her mother, who came from the religiously conservative Buzovna region of Azerbaijan, held strong religious beliefs. Although her father did not permit her mother to attend the mosque, she would still take Valida to the Blue Mosque. Additionally, four out of seven of my respondents had a religious marriage contract "*Kəbin*" in addition to their official state marriage contract. Esmira, for example, who repeatedly mentioned her being an atheist, emphasized the importance of having a "*Kəbin*" alongside the state affirmed marriage contract since it was a tradition coming from our grand grandmothers. Also, she said that Quran is placed over the couple's heads during wedding parties. Similarly, Leyla, Mahbuba, and Asmar also stressed the importance of having a *Kəbin*, but noted that it was necessary to have an official marriage contract, "*Zaks*," approved by the state prior to religious contract. Without official state marriage contract Mullahs were not providing the religious marriage contract. According to Leyla, this was the case for all her siblings and friends. This suggests that while the official state documents gained priority people still respected Mullah's presence and sought his services for their weddings. However, Esmira's case was different as she had both her marriage contracts

completed without her presence and on parallel terms. When talking about it, she admitted that she did not know what was written in the “*Kəbin paper*”<sup>7</sup> or if the Mullah had written anything at all, as it was just a tradition to have one. It can be interpreted that this practice of having religious contracts already started to get disconnected from the religious meaning of the practice. Valida mentions that her sister had her “*Kəbin*” ceremony at the engagement ceremony, which was done by her religious father-in-law. This was done to ensure that the engaged couple could interact in public without any problems. Unlike Esmira’s, Valida’s experience indicate that religious endorsement provided public acceptance for couples in community. Asmar, who grew up in Nakhchivan, also had her “*Kəbin*” ceremony before her official “*Zaks*”. Similar to Esmira, she did not participate in any of the ceremonies and only appointed people were present to receive the marriage contract. Asmar also discussed interesting religious practices in Sharur district, where women did not cover their heads and girls and boys could swim naked together. She also discussed Ashura practices, which were widely practiced until the 80s and after that, wideness of ceremony was limited to the mosque area.

Regarding weddings, three out of seven respondents did not have traditional Azerbaijani weddings, including Valida, Aliya, and Taliya. Valida talked about her sister's wedding in detail and how it was fun, whereas her own wedding was simple and boring since both she and her husband were komsomol and working for the Soviet government. Valida explained her wedding as:

“The workers of Party and Komsomol been controlled, and they were having their weddings at home. My mother wanted me to have “*kəbin*” but my husband did not let it and said that what if someone hears or spills this information. (Partiya, komsomol işçilərinə o vaxt nəzarət var idi, evdə toy eləyirdilər onlar. Anam deyirdi ki, *kəbin zad*

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<sup>7</sup> Referred as a certificate given upon the religious marriage contract done by Mullah.

kəsdirəm amma yoldaşım qoymurdu ki, mənə söz gələr. Sabah kimsə xəbərçi, paxıl nəşə olar)”.

These extracts from the interview with Valida depicts how the policy of government made them refrain from their tradition. In comparing the wedding celebrations of Party members to those of non-Party members, Valida noted an interesting point about her sister’s wedding: While her sister's wedding was more traditional and her sister's father-in-law was religious and did not allow alcohol at the wedding, alcohol was present and freely available for consumption at Valida's wedding.:

For example, in my sister’s wedding there was no alcohol, groom’s father did not permit it but in my wedding there was [alcohol] (Məsələn bacımın toyunda olmamışdı içki oğlanın atası qoymamışdı amma mənim toyumda vardı).

Aliya on the other hand, expressed her ambition to build her career and her dislike for show-off culture among Azerbaijanis. She worked for government and in her wedding as well similar to Valida she had simple wedding, but she described this wedding as modern, as European like wedding unlike Valida who repeated how simple and boring the wedding was. She also expressed how much she hated unnecessarily traditional luxury weddings of Azerbaijanis. Aliya:

Wedding shower or etc. I was civilized, and married like an employee of Ministry, like a wife of Member of Parliament. I did not like show-off culture, the desire to have everything in luxury manner (Ay toy hamamı, mən kulturniy Nazirlik işçisi kimi, deputat arvadı kimi getmişəm ərə. Biz evrəpeyski olmuşuq. Xoşuma gəlməyən o idi ki, deyirdilər o da olsun bu da olsun o roskash deyillərə mənim xoşuma gəlmirdi).

Comparing these two women Valida who was teacher but in her youth life komsomol was forced to have her wedding simple whereas Aliya who had quite a high rank in Soviet Azerbaijani government already did not like traditional Azerbaijani weddings. Taliya’s story also was similar to Aliya as she had very simple wedding without loud music, or a lot of guests. The similarity of Aliya and Taliya was that they both had good position in government and already believed that traditional Azerbaijani weddings were unnecessary. This indicates that there was an expectation of

downplaying Azerbaijani traditions and practices in order to fit the Soviet unitary representation discouraging different cultural expressions. Therefore, the ones willing to have good position in Soviet government and to be close to Party leaders had to fit into given cultural policy. It could be explained with the Collins' cultural domains of power (2019) the one who holds the power over cultural domain is the one to decide which cultural practices will be discouraged or encouraged publicly.

Different traditional practices continue during this era. Marriage match is an important aspect of how couples find each other. None of the respondents experienced arranged marriages and instead fell in love before getting married. However, Valida shared a story about her sister's marriage, where the man's sister arranged the union despite that the groom was in love with another girl. Since the family agreed, he ended up marrying Valida's sister. Leyla, on the other hand, recounted how many young men expressed their love for her, but she did not take their intentions seriously due to their age and employment status. It was not until she met her husband on a bus that she thought someone older and working must be serious. After two years of dating, the man spoke to Leyla's sister and sent his "*Elçi*<sup>8</sup>". Leyla explains how this process was in the past:

In order to get the permission to marry from the parents of girl, back then women were coming first and were asking for the agreement of her mother. Afterwards men were coming and the next stage was engagement where only women were participating. I got married in 1967 and until that not many weddings were with participation of both men and women together (Elçilikdə də əvvəlcə qadınlar gəlirdilər, qızın anasının razılığını alandan sonra kişilər gəlirdi və orada qızın atası iştirak edirdi "həri" mərasimində. Həri olandan sonra nişan mərasimi evdə olurdu. Nişanda kişilər olmurdu ancaq qadınlar, oğlanın anası bacısı iştirak edirdi. Mən özüm 1967-də ailə qurmuşam və onda tək-tük birləşik toylar olardı).

However, Leyla's wedding experience was different than her narrative about the past practices:

In our home I had small bride's wedding where I also had *khyna* ceremony, the wedding ceremony where both women and men participated was hosted and paid by

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<sup>8</sup> Elçi or Elçilik is a pre-wedding practice where the parents of groom visit the parents of bride in order to get their permission to marry their daughter.

groom. In that wedding from bride's family only very close people attended, even my mother did not attend (Evdə əvvəlcə balaca qız toyum oldu, haradakı xına da qoyuldu. Birləşik toyda isə də əksər hissəsini demək olar ki, oğlan evi ödəyirdi. Qız evinin hamısı iştirak etməyirdi oğlan toyunda. Ancaq yaxınlar, bacılarım, anam da utanardı getməzdi, anam olmamışdı bir yerdə olanda).

This tradition was also followed by Esmira and Asmar, who had their “*Elçilik*” in the same way, with women from their family speaking to their mother first, followed by men and then an engagement party. All of the women had a *khyna* ceremony, which Esmira and Leyla described as a bridal adornment and a sign of happiness. Asmar's explanation of the meaning of *khyna* is as follows:

*Khyna* represents the heaven, people dye dead body with it believing that it will go to heaven. For bride too it signifies the heaven (Cənnətin rəmzidir, ölüyə xına yaxırlar - cənnətə gedir guya. Gəlinə də cənnət rəmzidir).

Esmira enriched her narrative with touching upon “*paltarkəsdī*”:

When I was a child in Goychay I was attending “*paltarkəsdī*” ceremonies. It was like engagement party. People were demonstrating what groom's family brought for bride, starting from shoes, till underwear. It was an honor to have the best goods brought by groom's family. It was all women party and *khyna* ceremony also took place during this gathering (Mən Göyçayda olanda Paltarkəsdiyə gedərdim. O nişan kimidir. Bütün qıza nə gətiriblər bir-bir göstərirdilər. Bu qızın paltarı bu ayaqqabısı bu alt paltarı, bunları da oğlan evi gətirirdi. Bu belə şan-şöhrət idi. Sənin gətirdiklərin də qız evinə şan-şöhrət idi. Ancaq qadınlara olardı orada və xına da elə o vaxtı olardı)

Interestingly, none of the respondents mentioned the existence of “*paltarkəsdī*” except of Esmira. However, it can be due to two reasons, either other participants forgot to mention about it or it was specifically popular for Goychay district. However, we also have limited information to know whether the other regions that my interviewees were from had this practice or not.

The topic of separate weddings was raised by all the women, with only Esmira having two separate weddings, while the others had a single merged ceremony. Aliya was critical and perceived the practice negatively saying:

Muslims, ignorance. Women and men were not allowed to sit in the same party. Nobody liked it (Müsəlman, cəhalət. Kişi qadın birgə otura bilməz. Heç kimin xoşu gəlmirdi bundan).

Meaning, she did not have positive impressions about her Muslim neighbors and their living culture. According to Aliya, the main thing in life was for people to be educated and Muslim families not letting their daughters to study, as well as prohibiting them from participating in public gathering was totally unacceptable. Aliya's background being a civil servant in the Soviet government could be the possible reason for such interpretations of hers where education is given priority but religion and practices associated with it described as ignorance.

Esmira's family, who were prominent and from Baku, held two weddings in Aghdam, one for the local people and the other for guests from Baku. She participated in the wedding party and danced during the Baku guests' wedding but only sat silently in a room during the second one. The fact that one family had two different styles of wedding ceremonies, illustrates the differences between people living in the capital city and regions. It can be explained by the fact that the influence of central government located in capital city had more influence on those people and the people working for government. Therefore, ones living in regions were more likely to keep their traditions. Also urbanization factor as well could explain it. Dancing was more acceptable for cities and in rural settings where people lived in close communities expectation for continuation of tradition more intensely lived. A similar example is Asmar's Ashura practices. The prohibition of religious practices was enforced in Baku, but in Nakhchivan, where it was geographically distant from the center, such practices were still observed. This again, brings us who holds the power in the cultural domain.

Aliya provided a description of the differences in lifestyle between Muslims, Armenians, and Russians in Khankendi. While Armenians and Russians shared everything, Muslims maintained

and preserved their traditions. Aliya shared a poignant memory of her Muslim friend who had to wait inside a room with her "yengə"<sup>9</sup> until the wedding concluded and people took her to the groom's home:

She was just sitting her head down, even though we were waiving to her from outside. Bride was not dancing or participating in the party. And at the end they just came and took her to the room (Belə oturudu biz də qapıdan ona əl eləyirdik elə başıaşağı qalmışdı. Gəlin dursun oynasın yox. Axırda toy qurtarandan sonra da aparırdılar otağa).

Similarly Esmira's wedding held for local people of Aghdam was held in the same way where she had to wait inside a room and not join the party:

I remember I joined the party. In the party that was organized for people coming from Baku, I joined the party but in the party for people of village I was waiting in the home. (Mən yadıma gəlir mağarda oturmuşdum. Şəhərdən gələnlərin toyunda mağarda oturmuşdum amma kənddəkilərin iştirakı ilə olanda evdə oturmuşdu).

Asmar also shared a story similar to this where she had to wait alone in a room until the wedding celebrations ended. On her wedding day, she received her *khyna* and the following morning, she wore her wedding dress and was taken to the groom's home. Interestingly, other women, including Leyla, Esmira, Valida, and Mahbuba, talked about the "*üzəçixdi*" tradition, in which the bride had to remain in her room for three days after the wedding night. During this time, male family members were forbidden to see the bride and women, especially bride's relatives brought dinner to bride for three days. Leyla saw it as a sign of the bride's shyness: "Probably, because of shyness, being Muslim (Yəqin utancaqlıq var, müsəlmançılığa görə)". While Esmira saw it as a time for the

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<sup>9</sup> As a formal definition it is a woman who guides the bride and prepares her for the wedding night. Also following the bride to the bridegroom's house and assuring her virginity prior to the wedding by collecting the sheets covered with blood stains and bringing them to the bride's parents were included in her responsibilities. When asked from participants, majority of the respondents referred to the role of the *yengə* as assuring the virginity as the major responsibility. Esmira said that in the absence of *yengə* people were gossiping "nəsə paxırı var ki, yengəsi yoxdur" meaning she definitely has something to hide, thus she does not have her (*yengə*).

bride to recover and relieve her stress: “For 3 days bride was recovering, relieving the stress (3 gün qız özünə gəlirdidə o stresdən çıxırdı)”.

Valida also experienced a similar tradition, despite having a more Soviet-style wedding. This case being very interesting one prevails that even though wedding looked like “Soviet style”, in hidden parts of it, certain local traditions continued to prevail. Culture is a lived-experience and existence of different practices can only be identified through the narratives of people as it appears here in the details of Valida’s “Soviet style” wedding that included Azerbaijani local practices. Locality is important to remind us that there is no “one” local practice, there are diverse experiences and expressions. For example, Asmar noted that in her village-Sharur, no such tradition as "*üzəçixdi*" existed, and the bride was free to go out and talk to whomever she pleased right after the wedding night. The same was true for Aliya and Taliya. They were also not required to stay in their room for three days after their wedding. Interestingly, although Aliya and Taliya claimed to have no knowledge of such traditions and criticized it, Asmar was aware that such practices existed in other regions of Azerbaijan, and argued that no one in their region had such a custom. If I were to argue that this was due to the influence of proximity to the government and their influence, Asmar's case would contradict it, since she had no affiliation with a government job or party membership. Additionally, Valida, whose husband and father worked for the Party, as well as herself being a member of the Komsomol, experienced this tradition. Hence, gender practices and how women are perceived are not singular in Azerbaijani culture, different regions have different views and practices. This indicates that Azerbaijani culture has variety of local practices and traditions which cannot be reduced to “one”. What can be observed here is that wedding practices were multiple depending on the region and as people were located more in the center and affiliated with the

government their various traditions and practices were reduced to “Soviet experience” in the public domain and retained their local practices in private ceremonies.

As an indication to multiple practices, practice of serving tea could be mentioned. Interestingly, serving tea by women was a customary practice, not only in Buzova, but in various regions of Azerbaijan, and this tradition still continues to this day. But opposite of this also existed in some regions of Azerbaijan. Aliya shared a personal story about her experience living in Imishli region:

Secretary, prosecutor came to our home and back then women could not serve, men were serving. My husband’s brother told me that Aliya, in our family we do not have such practice, and I told him that did I come to this home as a woman, I am also man. Nobody can tell me anything. Women were only allowed to serve close relatives not like ministers. I took tea and Minister recognized me and asked whether I came here to work but they intervened by saying that host is my husband. Minister gone crazy that how I am not working here and he told to Secretary that I should definitely be working and I promised to go back to Baku (Gəldi katib prokror, hamısı gəldilər, onda da arvadlar qulluq edə bilmirdidə, kişilər gətiridi. Mən dedim qaynıma veridn mənı çayı, apardım qonalqara. Mənə dedi ki, Aliya bizdə elə şey yoxdu bizdə arvadlar qulluq eləmir, mən də dedim ki, a mən bəyəm arvad gəmişəm bura mən də kişiyəm. Mənə heç kim heç nə deyə bilməzdi. Arvadlar ancaq qohum ərərbaya qulluq edə bilərdi day belə ministr zad yox. Aldım çayı apardım. Ministr görüb dedi ay qızım sən burda nə gəzirsən, sən də burdasan, bura gəlmisən işləməyə, onlar da qayıtdı ki, işləmir Əlinin yoldaşdır. Kişi də dəli oldu ki, necə yanı işləmirsən burda. Dedim yox, işləmirəm, katibə dedi ki, mütləq bu qızı qoy işə. Mən də dedim Bakıya gələcəm mütləq).

Aliya's story was mainly about her regret of stopping work after marriage, and each of her stories contained a working element, including the officials' visit. This interesting picture from life of Aliya describes the idea that division of labor between sexes is depiction of how their religious and gender identities depend on interactional expectation of different social spaces (Ozkaleli, 2021). In many cultures and places “serving tea” may be regarded as a “female gender role” but in this particular locality, women’s privacy was regarded in such a way that business colleagues should not be seeing the wives, hence tea serving in that context became “male gender role”. Along

with a woman who refused to follow the societal roles attached to them describe themselves as becoming “man” (cf. Ozkaleli 2021).

Leyla and Asmar informed me about a couple of post-wedding customs, including "*ayaqaçdı*", which is when the mother of the bride invites her daughter to visit her, and from then on, the bride can visit her mother whenever she pleases. According to Leyla, this tradition is due to the modesty of the bride and her mother, which is also according to Leyla is the reason why the bride's parents do not attend the wedding ceremony. Asmar and Validia's parents also did not attend their respective daughters' weddings- - “*utanırdılar*” (they were shy). Although literature lacked the information about unwillingness of the parents of bride to attend the wedding given the narrative of women in his study, it could be argued that it was related to patriarchal family structure. Meaning, bride’s family is usually taking a back stage position. For example, while organizing the celebration ceremonies main costs are covered by groom’s family, and the party organized in groom’s house is considered as the main celebration. Leyla shared an interesting post-wedding custom that was not found in the literature review, called "*Çiləçixdı*":

Yes, for 40 days bride should be far from evil eye, she should have harmal, after 40 days all the troubles of the bride go away. According to religion, during first 40 days if ill person comes there is a risk for bride to not have a child (Hə, *çilə guya gəlinə 40 gün göz dəyməməlidir, yanında üzərlik olmalı qızın, o 40 gün çıxandan sonra elə bil ki, qızın xata balası çıxır. Dini etiqada görü guya 40 gün içində gəlinin yanına xəstə adam, pis əlamətləri olan adam, ki, birən o adam çiləyə düşər və gəlinin uşağı olmaz*).

During my interviews, I also asked my participants about their parents' marriage stories to have better picture of the past. Although some had limited information, others provided very detailed accounts. For instance, Mahbuba shared that her mother Lamiya got married at the young age of 10, and even during the wedding, she fell asleep after eating. According to Mahbuba, her Lamiya had not yet started menstruating and was simply playing games with other children or the groom's family. The marital relations between groom and bride started only after girls reached menstrual

period. The reason for her early marriage was that Mahbuba's grandmother was widowed and frequently visited the future husband of Mahbuba's mother (he was also widowed and they were relatives). Lamiya's widowed mother frequently visited Lamiya's widowed future husband who was a relative. When Mahbuba's grandfather passed away, all of his wealth was given to her mother's future husband, resulting in more frequent visits between the families. However, due to the village's gossip surrounding the widowed wife, Mahbuba's grandmother decided to marry her 10-year-old daughter, Lamiya to that rich relative of theirs to avoid any further rumors. According to Leyla, she did not have open or sincere relations with her parents, so she never discussed with them the topic of love and marriage. Nonetheless, she heard that young men and women did not have the opportunity to see or love each other before marriage, as their unions were based solely on recommendations. However, according to Taliya's story this practice was present in some regions of Azerbaijan even in the 60s.

In Gubadli I gathered group of girls to practice [the dance]. Afterwards I thought of going back to Baku to rest. When I returned back, the girls were missing. Boys while we were practicing were staring and choosing the bride for themselves. In their region boys were not allowed to see the bride before marriage, that is why when they saw in our practice, right after that they kidnapped the girls. All of them had their wedding and all of them were very grateful to me that I made them the happiest (Qubadlı tərəfə qızlardan ibarət ansambl yığdım, məşq zad elədik. Sonra dedim gedim evə istirahət eləyim Bakıya. Qayıtdım ki, qızlar yoxdur. Oğlanlar hamısı məşq eləyəndə baxıb seçib özünə arvad. Oralarda evlənəndə oğlanlar qızın üzün görmürdü, ona görə də baxıblar orda görüblər sonrada qaçırıblar. O qızların hamısını qaçırıblar, sonra toy ediblər, hamısı da xoşbəxt olublar. Deyirdilər ki, Roza xanım, siz onları xoşbəxt etdiniz. Məşq edəndə elə ordan burdan baxıblarmış).

Valida's mother only shared her aunt's story of how she met her husband, which involved the guard of the street frequently visiting their home to see her. However, Valida did not inquire about the details of the wedding process. She only knew that her mother was from the village of Buzovna in Baku, which had strict religious traditions that are still observed today.

The wedding party was at home and separately for women and men. In bride's wedding groom's parents were attending but in groom's party no single person from

bride's family were not coming only men were attending. Until today in Buzovna "Elçilik" ceremony is done by men only and women are in charge of tea serving (Toy evdə olardı, kişilər ayrı qadınlar ayrı olurdu. Qız toyunda oğlanın atası anası gəlirdi amma oğlan toyundan qız evindən olmazdı adam. Ancaq kişi xeylaxları gedirdi. İndiyə kimi buzovnadada o vaxtkı kimi kişilər eləyir elçiliyi ancaq qadınlar çay işinə baxır).

As for her mother's story:

I remember that they were in Shusha and my mother was talking that my grandfather was coming to see the girl and her father hid her over the wardrobe. They were relatives and my mother was 16-17 years old, but my grandfather saw my mother, and she was very beautiful. My father back then was already a teacher, he also saw my mother, but it was not prohibited to meet back then [before marriage]. After this day the "Elçilik" ceremony happened (Onlar Şuşada olub, bircə yadımdadır ki, danışdı ki, atamın atası qıza baxmağa gəlin o da nənəni şifonerin başında gizlədiblər. Qohum idikdə gəlirdilər baxmağa anamın da 16-17 yaşı var cavan, qaldırıb atası qoyub şifonerin üstünü, deyib üzə çıxma. O da kişi görüb, anam gözəl olub çox. Atam da onda uje müəllim idi, atam da görüb anamı, amma görüşmək olmurdu o vaxtlar. Sonra da elçi göndəriblər).

Interestingly, while some of the women in the study claimed that their marriages were solely based on recommendations, Aliya's story suggests that even in such cases, the groom had the opportunity to see the future bride and make the final decision about marrying her. Asmar's story was as such:

Upon my uncle's recommendation my father goes to see my mother and afterward says his willingness to marry her (Dayımın tövsiyəsi ilə bu [atam] gedir mamamı görür. Deyir ki, alarsan onu – anamı).

Taliya's mother's story was even more intriguing:

Yes, my mother was so beautiful for those times and my father liked her and sent his "elçi" but her family did not agree. Father old, grandmother old and girl 15 years old. He went to Georgia and came back after 1 year and kidnapped my mother (Hə, anam dövrünə görə çox gözəl olub atam da görüb bəyənilib, elçi gəlib amma vermək istəməyiblər. Ata böyük, nənəsi qoca, qızın da 15 yaşı olub vermək istəməyiblər. Gedib Gürcüstana sonra 1 ildən sonra gəlib təzədən, sonra qaçırıb).

None of the women recalled any details about the marriage traditions or contracts, except for

Esmira:

In her case [her mother] she had religious contract only but afterwards they went for state marriage contract as well in order to obtain birth certificate for us (Onda molla kəbini olub ancaq amma sonradan zaksa gediblər ki, bizə metirka alsınlar).

The study found that most participants obtained both religious and state marriage certificates, except for those who worked for the government. Some participants, such as Valida's sister and Asmar, considered obtaining the religious certificate before the official state contract to be the essence of "kəbin". In contrast, Leyla emphasized that the Mullah needed proof of the state's confirmation of the marriage to issue the certificate. Esmira, however, was not aware of any specific order of obtaining the certificates and received both almost simultaneously. When comparing the stories of the participants and their parents, the study suggests that their parents typically only obtained the certificate from the Mullah, and only after the Soviet government's requirement they obtain the official state certificate. For most ordinary Azerbaijanis, however, it was the official approval of the state that came first, followed by the religious certificate. This finding suggests that the practice of obtaining religious certificates and the meaning attached to it may have different emphasize in different political times. In the later years, when the study participants were marrying, obtaining the religious document became disconnected from its religious roots and has instead become a tradition and a way of life for families.

Each of the women interviewed had varying opinions regarding the impact of the Soviet empire on their lives. While Aliya and Taliya emphasized the significance of education and the opportunities it provided, they acknowledged that their fathers' education had played a vital role in their upbringing. Although Taliya's mother was the only interviewee who had a job, all of the women themselves worked and were educated, which is a notable achievement in itself. Thus, the women's perspectives on the Soviet period underscored the importance of education and the progress made by women during that era.

## CONCLUSION

The study aimed at analyzing evolution of Azerbaijani culture and the external factors playing a role in it. Main focus was to discover the religion's role as a cultural element reflected in wedding rituals. It helped to observe the possible changes, continuations, and interruptions in the cultural evolution of Azerbaijan during the Soviet era. Analyzed through wedding practices of 7 older generation women, the research found out the effect of pressure by the Soviet governors on people was determining factor for people to forget some of the old traditions. The findings of the study are not limited to this only, also interesting cases as well as differentiations between the regions and the people depending on their affiliation were worth mentioning. The interview participant originating from the Nakhchivan region provided insights into the unrestricted practice of religious ceremonies in public settings. Furthermore, it was commonplace for boys and girls to play together from an early age. Another participant, who had her wedding in the Aghdam region, assisted us in comprehending that while it was considered normal for the capital city and its residents to have bride dancing in her wedding celebrations, this was not the case for the local people of Aghdam. Depending on the interviewees' affiliations, both traditional wedding ceremonies and those influenced by the "Soviet style" were observed. It is worth mentioning that there were even cases that woman had her wedding in Soviet style because of her affiliation but was not happy of it. However, there were cases when women were proud of their modest weddings unlike other relatives' traditional wedding ceremonies. Although these findings represent only a fraction of the study's outcomes, they enable us to contend that the control over culture by those in power results in lifestyle changes among the people. In other words, which cultural practices are given acceptance and which ones are discouraged from publicly displayed are decided by who holds the power over the cultural domain. Such changes may have a detrimental impact on the transmission

of cultural traditions to future generations, as evidenced by the limited awareness of Azerbaijan's culture and its essence among the youth with whom I interact. The study was pilot study and aimed to pave a way for future related studies to be conducted to analyze deeper the cultural evolution of Azerbaijan as well as the lifestyles of women. It is also worth mentioning that importance of this research will be providing the ground for policymakers. The policymakers should understand the audience they are targeting for successful policy designs. Cultural elements are the ones that identify the group of people, but also separate the individuals from each other. If the policymaker is well aware of identifying the differences and commonalities of groups, the policy will be shaped accordingly for meeting the needs of that specific group. By conducting this research, I aimed to create a better platform for studying the cultural identity and cultural patterns of Azerbaijan to address the needs of people as well as to create the initial study for future researches on this topic. Additionally, by narration of the stories told by older generation women, this paper will serve as a reference point for future studies aiming at comparative analysis of cultural transformations considering insights of older generation on the life during mid-20th century.

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## Appendix 1. Interview questions:

1. How was your childhood like?
  - a. Where did you grow up?

- b. Could you describe me please how was the school time.
  - c. What have you been taught at school and family? Were you taught anything about marriage?
- 2. What things you remember about weddings in your childhood?
  - a. How were they?
  - b. Are there weddings that you went as a child that you have not forgotten/ were memorable for you? (If yes, what was distinct about them)
  - c. How were the close family or friend weddings like when you were a child?
- 3. What were you told about marriage?
- 4. What did you think about marriage when you were a child?
- 5. What about later when you were older? How was your approach to marriage?
- 6. When was your turn to get married?
- 7. How you got married? How the process started and evolved to wedding? Could you please give me the information about the stages? Who chose your partner? What were the things made him/her suitable? What thing made you suitable for the other side?
- 8. What were the responsibilities of your mother, father, siblings, other close family members for preparations for the wedding?
- 9. What are the things given importance to ceremonies, what were the traditions?
- 10. What is Henna ceremony?
  - a. Did you have Henna ceremony? Why was it held?
- 11. How were brides wearing in their wedding day? What was the color of. dress? Why was that? When did white dress start?
- 12. Any specific accessories that bride had to wear? What were the meanings of each?

13. What kind of religious ceremonies did you have for your wedding?
14. Were there separate wedding ceremonies for men and women where you lived? If yes, why did they do that? Your approach to it? If not, what is your opinion on that? What was the meaning of that?
15. Wedding night expectations?
16. Are there any changes in the traditions that you see now are different compared to what you experienced when you were young?
17. Any other things you would like to tell me.
18. Thank you for your time.