THE TRADITIONAL MARRIAGE RITUAL
“NIKOH” IN TWO TAJIK FAMILIES

“Nikoh” is an important traditional ceremony in Muslim matrimony that takes place before the new family is blessed by God. This ceremony is an Islamic ritual. Nikoh is derived from the Arabic word “nakaha” and it implies tying the lives of a man and a woman. In all Muslim families Nikoh runs in accordance with the prescriptions written in the Holy Book Qur’an (one entire “sura – an-Nisa” is devoted to the theme of marriage). This formal procedure has historical roots, forming during the Islam expansion in the seventh and eighth centuries, and continues today despite the globalization process introducing changes to religious rituals in contemporary Islamic societies. Most Muslims still follow the rules and customs of their ancestors, while at times skipping some antiquated views and devotions. But it is worth mentioning that despite belonging to one religion, different peoples have different interpretations and ways of setting up the marriage ceremony, including the Nikoh ritual, even in a single country. In this paper I will examine the differences in the Nikoh ritual between different regions in Tajikistan. The article specifically discusses some religious aspects of the only Islamic marriage ritual Nikoh, which usually attracts foreigners because of its specificities and strong restrictions of close sexual relations before marriage. My paper mostly focuses on the main differences and peculiarities between Southern Tajik Nikoh and Eastern (Pamiri) one.

Tajikistan is a mountainous country (93 percent of the lands are covered by hills and mountains) located in Central Asia – the region in Asia with the richest natural resources. To the north the country borders on Kyrgyzstan, to the south Afghanistan, to the west Uzbekistan and China to the east. Hence, Tajikistan has common historical and traditional similarities with its neighboring countries. Tajikistan is one of the former United Soviet Socialist Republics, and gained its sovereignty for the first time in September, 1991. In fact, due to its small population, between 1925 and 1929, after the removal of the last Bukhara ruler, Amir Olimkhon, Tajikistan was incorporated as part of the Uzbek Soviet Socialist Republic. In 1929 it was integrated into the Soviet Union as the Tajik Soviet Socialist Republic, with the population of Khujand enlarging its total area to 143,100 square kilometers. Nowadays Tajikistan is an independent, law-based and democratic state with the president at the helm. But it still re-
pects and follows Islam’s injunctions and orders, including those in relation to the marriage ceremony. There are different types of Nikoh procedures, as well as different types of weddings conducted in the South, North, and East (Pamir) of Tajikistan.

In contemporary times we frequently face the case wherein newly-formed families break up before having come into their full existence. After gaining independence, compared to the Soviet times, Tajik youth have changed their interests. Currently, their ambitions have been replacing by early marriage and, at the same time, by immediate divorce, which is considered a primary step on the path to social degradation. In Islam the common life of a male and a woman starts from the very day when Nikoh is conducted.

To better explain and give a full description of the issue, I observed two ways of Nikoh conducting in Tajik families: a Southern wedding, and a Pamiri wedding. As an example of a southern wedding I observed my brother’s marriage in 2005, which I compare to my grandmother’s of the late 1940s, both measured up to the Pamiri type of marriage. I mainly focus here on the procedure, ways and manners of our religious marriage ritual.

My brother married at the age of 28, when his wife was 25. This is not typical in our society, since the youth usually get married between 20-22 years of age for men, and 18-20 years of age for women (when they are not yet “spoiled”). This marriage age limit is lower in rural places. Our family belongs to the customs and traditions of central part of Tajikistan, which is very close to the South. My parents do not compel us to marry a person whom we do not know. My elder sisters have found their husbands themselves and married them out of love.

My brother, however, could not find any likely partner and asked my mother to find one for him. In fact, most of the weddings in Central Asian families are held with the wishes of the parents, who traditionally find their children’s partner. The children in this case have to obey their parents’ choice and accept the partner proposed by their Elders, who are experienced and wise enough to make a right selection. In reality my younger sister proposed to introduce her friend to my brother. Upon meeting they realized that they had formerly worked together. Later on they decided to get married. My grandmother, in contrast, did not have any experience with men before her marriage, since it was the custom at that time that girls were not allowed to be in one room with a man, nor stay next to a man. Nowadays the situation has changed significantly. The most vivid aspects of my grandmother’s story were the specificities of conducting Nikoh in pre-Soviet times (1900s-1920s), which mostly differs from how the ritual is conducted today. The marital obligations from the early to mid-1900s were very strong.