The Unbroken Circle: An Ethnographic Report on Pre-Modern Kurdish Wedding Traditions

Introduction

The Kurdish people, indigenous to a mountainous region spanning parts of modern-day Turkey, Iran, Iraq, and Syria, represent not a monolithic entity but a rich and complex mosaic of cultures, dialects, and religious beliefs.[1] Before the profound societal transformations of the 20th century, the institution of marriage (
dawet in Kurdish) stood as the central pillar of social organization. It was far more than the union of two individuals; it was a meticulously orchestrated, multi-stage process that forged political alliances, managed economic exchange, reinforced communal identity, and ensured the continuity of the kin group. Despite significant regional variations among speakers of Kurmanji and Sorani, or between adherents of Sunni Islam, Alevism, and the ancient Yezidi faith, a common cultural grammar underpins these traditions, revealing a shared understanding of marriage as the primary mechanism for structuring society.
This report provides a detailed ethnographic reconstruction of these pre-modern wedding traditions. Drawing upon a range of historical and cultural sources, it will chronologically navigate the entire marital process, from the initial diplomatic negotiations between families to the final integration of the new couple into the community. The analysis will demonstrate that every stage of the wedding—from the exchange of gifts to the performance of specific dances and the application of henna—was imbued with profound social, economic, and symbolic meaning. It functioned as a public theater where new alliances were ratified, social statuses were redefined, and the collective values of the community were powerfully affirmed.
To orient the reader to the cultural diversity at play, the following table presents a comparative overview of key wedding customs across different Kurdish groups.

Ritual/Custom	General Terminology (Kurdish/Persian/Turkish)	Regional Variation & Notes	Key Symbolic Function
Proposal	*Khwazmany* (Kurdish), خواستگاری (Persian)	A formal delegation of male elders (*Rîspî*) is near-universal. In some areas, an initial visit by	Formalizes intent, initiates diplomatic negotiation between kin groups, and seeks

		female relatives precedes the formal proposal.[3]	community consensus.
Bride Price	*Shirbaha* (Persian/Kurdish), *Qelen* (Yezidi), *Süt Parası* (Turkish term in Hakkari)	Payment from groom's family to bride's family. Could be cash, gold, or livestock. The amount was a point of major negotiation.[4]	Compensation for loss of labor, demonstration of groom's economic capacity, and a guarantee of the bride's good treatment.
Dowry	*Cihêz* (Kurdish), جهیزیه (Persian)	Goods (textiles, household items) the bride brings to the marriage. A public procession to collect the *Cihêz* was common.[6]	Bride's contribution to the new household, establishment of her status, and a form of female property.
Virtual Kinship	*Kirîvatî* (Kurdish), *Kirvelik* (Turkish)	A sacred bond formed during a boy's circumcision, creating a lifelong alliance between two families and an absolute prohibition on intermarriage.[8]	Creates a powerful, non-marital alliance, forcing families to diversify their social network and fostering broader community cohesion.
Henna Night	*Hanabandan* (Persian), *Khane be nan* (Kurdish)	Separate ceremonies for bride and groom. The bride's is often marked by ritualized sorrow and songs to make her cry.[4]	A rite of passage; for the bride, it is a symbolic separation from her natal family. Henna signifies blessing, beauty, and protection.
Wedding Dance	*Halparke*, *Govend*	Communal circle dance with linked hands/shoulders. The bride and groom lead the dance, holding a decorated handkerchief (*desmal*).[6]	Embodiment of community solidarity, collective joy, and the integration of the couple into the social whole.
Bride's Procession	*Bûk anîn* (Bringing the bride)	Traditionally on a decorated horse or	The physical and symbolic transition of

		mule. Marked by rituals like the tying of a "maidenhood belt" and the showering of the bride with coins and sweets (*Shabash*).[3]	the bride from her father's domain to her husband's, marked by rites of passage and incorporation.

Section 1: The Foundations of Union: Pre-Nuptial Arrangements and Social Contracts

In pre-modern Kurdish society, the path to marriage was not paved with individual romance but with carefully laid stones of familial strategy and communal consensus. The period preceding the public celebration was a phase of intense negotiation, where the union was constructed as a social and economic contract between two kin groups. The public wedding festivities served as the dramatic final act and ratification of these foundational agreements, which were designed to ensure stability, manage resources, and extend the web of alliances crucial for survival and influence.

1.1 The Art of the Proposal (Khwazmany): A Diplomatic Mission

The initiation of a marriage was a communal, not an individual, prerogative. When a young man decided on a potential spouse, his first step was to inform his own family.[6] This act triggered a discreet but thorough investigation by his kin into the reputation, standing, and character of the prospective bride and her family. The union was seen as a merger of two lineages, and thus compatibility was assessed at the level of the entire family unit.[10]

Once the initial inquiries were satisfactory, the formal proposal, known as *Khwazmany* (from the Kurdish verb *xwestin*, "to want" or "to ask for"), was set in motion. This was not a casual request but a highly structured diplomatic event. A formal delegation, comprising the groom's father, uncles, other respected male elders (*Rîspî*), and sometimes a local religious figure (*mela*), would be assembled to visit the bride's father.[6] The composition of this delegation was itself a statement, reflecting the groom's family's social capital and the seriousness of their intent. In some traditions, this formal male-led mission was preceded by a less formal visit from the groom's mother and other senior female relatives. This initial meeting served to gauge the receptiveness of the bride's family and establish a rapport between the women of the two households, illustrating a gendered division of labor in the delicate art of marital diplomacy.[3]

Acceptance was rarely granted during the first visit. The bride's family would typically request time to consider the offer, a period used for their own inquiries into the groom and his family. Often, several meetings were required to discuss the intricate terms of the alliance.[10] These

sessions were not merely about gaining consent for the marriage but about negotiating the very architecture of the future relationship between the two families. This deliberate and multi-staged process underscored the gravity of the commitment, framing marriage as a strategic alliance with long-term consequences for the entire kin group.

1.2 Sealing the Pact: Betrothal and Engagement (Dazwarani / Shirini-Khoran)

Once the two families reached a principal agreement, the pact was sealed and publicly announced through a betrothal ceremony. In many parts of Iranian Kurdistan, this event was known as *Shirini-Khoran*, literally "sweet-eating".[6] The groom's family would arrive at the bride's home bearing trays of sweets and other gifts, which were shared among the gathered relatives. This act of sharing sweetness symbolized the hope for a harmonious and pleasant future for the couple and their families. During this ceremony, the bride and groom might exchange rings, formally marking their engagement and making their commitment known to the wider community.[6]

The formal engagement period, or *Dazwarani*, established a binding relationship with a clear set of obligations. It was inaugurated by the groom's family presenting the bride with significant gifts that served as a tangible symbol of their commitment and economic standing. This typically included at least one complete traditional outfit and a set of gold jewelry.[3] These were not mere tokens of affection but a substantial investment, demonstrating the groom's family's ability and willingness to provide for their future daughter-in-law.

Throughout the engagement, this flow of gifts continued. The groom was expected to provide his fiancée with new clothes and other presents for every major holiday and festival.[3] This practice served to continuously reinforce the bond between the families and publicly affirm the groom's ongoing responsibility towards the bride, even before they were officially wed.

The engagement was a vulnerable period for the couple, particularly for the bride's reputation. A broken engagement could bring significant shame and embarrassment to her and her family, as the community might speculate about impropriety. For this reason, engagements were often kept relatively short, with the wedding planned to take place within a year of the agreement.[5]

1.3 The Economics of Marriage: Bride Price (Shirbaha) and Dowry (Cihêz)

At the heart of the marriage contract lay a sophisticated system of economic exchange that created reciprocal obligations and balanced the investment of both families in the new union. This system was characterized by two distinct and opposing flows of wealth: the bride price, which moved from the groom's family to the bride's, and the dowry, which the bride brought

with her into the marriage.

The bride price, known most commonly as *Shirbaha* in Iranian and Iraqi Kurdistan and as *Qelen* among Yezidi communities, was a transfer of wealth in the form of money, gold, or livestock (such as sheep or oxen) from the groom's family to the bride's father.[1] Ethnographically, it is crucial to understand that this was not a "purchase" of the bride. The practice served a complex set of social and economic functions. First, it acted as compensation to the bride's family for the loss of her valuable labor in the household and fields, as well as her presence within the family unit.[12] Second, it was a public demonstration of the groom's family's economic stability and their ability to support a wife. Third, it functioned as a form of insurance for the bride's good treatment; in cases of unjust divorce initiated by the husband, the bride price might be forfeited. Finally, it carried a symbolic weight of gratitude. In the Hakkari region, for instance, a portion of this payment was specifically called *süt parası* ("milk money"), a direct gesture of thanks to the bride's mother for having nursed and raised her.[4] The negotiation of the *Shirbaha* was a central and often contentious part of the pre-nuptial discussions. A high bride price could be a significant financial burden, sometimes necessitating the intervention of respected community elders to mediate and find a mutually agreeable sum.[4] The financial strain of this custom has persisted into modern times, with Yezidi community leaders in the diaspora advising a cap on the *qelen* to ease the burden on refugee families.[5]

Moving in the opposite direction was the dowry, or *Cihêz*. This consisted of the goods that the bride brought with her from her parents' house to establish her new home.[7] The *Cihêz* typically included hand-woven carpets (*kilim*), bedding, copper kitchenware, clothing, and other household necessities. These items were often prepared by the bride and her female relatives over many years in anticipation of her marriage. The *Cihêz* was fundamentally the bride's property and her contribution to the new domestic economy. It established her status within her new home and provided her with a measure of economic security. The transportation of the dowry from the bride's home to the groom's was itself a public ritual, a procession that displayed the wealth and industry of the bride's family.[6]

The existence of this dual system of economic exchange, rather than a single payment, reveals a sophisticated social logic. A one-way payment of bride price alone could easily be misconstrued as a commercial transaction, devaluing the bride and her family. Conversely, a system with only a dowry would place the entire economic burden of establishing the new household on the bride's family. The dual system of *Shirbaha* and *Cihêz* created a mechanism of balanced reciprocity. The groom's family invested in the alliance by compensating the bride's kin, while the bride's family invested directly in their daughter's future and the material foundation of the new household. This structure transformed the marriage from a potentially extractive arrangement into a joint venture, giving both families a tangible, economic stake in the stability and success of the union. It was this shared investment that acted as a powerful social stabilizer, binding the two kin groups together through a web of mutual obligation.

1.4 Forging Bonds Beyond Blood: The Institution of Kirîvatî (Virtual Kinship)

Beyond the alliances created through blood and marriage, pre-modern Kurdish society possessed a unique institution for forging powerful, lifelong bonds between families: *Kirîvatî* (or *Kirvelik* in its Turkish rendering).[8] This form of ritual co-parenthood, or "virtual kinship," established a sacred relationship that was often considered more binding than that of distant blood relatives.

The bond of *Kirîvatî* was typically formed during a boy's circumcision ceremony. A man from a chosen family would act as the *kirîv* for the son of another. During the rite, the *kirîv* would hold the boy on his lap, comforting him and symbolically sharing in this critical rite of passage and the shedding of blood.[14] This shared experience created an indissoluble link between the two men and, by extension, their entire families. From that moment on, they were bound by sacred obligations of mutual aid, unwavering loyalty, and lifelong support in all matters, economic and social.[9] The relationship functioned as a form of "social insurance," guaranteeing a reliable ally in times of need.[9]

The most profound social consequence of establishing a *Kirîvatî* relationship was the imposition of a strict and absolute taboo on marriage between the two families. Their children were thereafter considered siblings in the eyes of the community, and any romantic union between them was deemed incestuous.[9] At first glance, this prohibition might seem counterintuitive. Why create such a powerful, family-like bond only to forbid the most common method of cementing an alliance—marriage?

The logic of the marriage prohibition is the key to understanding the institution's strategic social function. In a society where alliances were paramount, relying solely on marriage to build a support network had its limitations. It could lead to the concentration of power and resources within a small, closed-off clique of intermarrying families. The *Kirîvatî* system provided a powerful alternative pathway for creating kinship. The marriage taboo was essential because it forced families to look outside their *kirîv* relationships for marital partners. This created a social imperative for diversification. A single family could thus build a broad and resilient social network composed of three distinct but equally important strands: their kin by blood (*meriv*), their kin by marriage (*xizm*), and their sacred kin by *Kirîvatî*. This multi-layered network prevented the formation of isolated power blocs and fostered a wider, more integrated social cohesion, even creating bridges between different ethnic and religious groups, as Kurds could form *Kirîvatî* bonds with Armenian or Syriac neighbors.[8]

Section 2: The Rites of Passage: The Wedding Ceremonies

The wedding celebration itself was the grand public performance that legitimized the union

negotiated in private. Often lasting for several days and nights, these festivities were not merely a party but a series of deeply symbolic rituals designed to manage the profound social transition of the bride and groom.[3] Through music, dance, feasting, and procession, the community collectively witnessed and ratified the couple's passage into their new roles and the formal establishment of a new household.

2.1 The Eve of Transformation: Henna Night (Hanabandan)

The night before the wedding was dedicated to the *Hanabandan* (حنابندان), a ceremony centered on the application of henna. In Kurdish, this event is also known as *Khane be nan*.[6] Separate gatherings were held for the bride and groom, each with a distinct emotional tone that reflected their differing transitional roles.[6]

The groom's henna night was a joyous affair, a celebration with his male friends and relatives marking his last night as a bachelor. Henna, a paste made from the Lawsonia inermis plant, was applied to his right little finger and sometimes a toe. A coin was often pressed into the henna in his palm as a symbol of future prosperity and good fortune before his hand was wrapped in cloth.[4]

In stark contrast, the bride's ceremony was imbued with a complex and ritualized sorrow. While it was a gathering of her closest female relatives and friends, the atmosphere was deliberately melancholic. Traditional sad songs were sung with the explicit purpose of making the bride cry.[4] This institutionalized sadness was not an expression of unhappiness with the marriage but a crucial component of a rite of passage. The tears symbolized the bride's genuine grief at leaving her natal home, her parents, and the life she had always known. From an anthropological perspective, this ritual serves as the "separation" phase of her social transformation. The community, through its songs, guides the bride in performing a public act of severance from her identity as a daughter in her father's house. This emotional catharsis was considered a necessary prelude to her journey and eventual incorporation into a new family.

Amidst this sorrow, the henna was prepared and applied to the bride's hands and feet. The henna itself is a powerful symbol, representing beauty, fertility, good luck, and protection against the evil eye. A common ritual involved the bride playfully keeping her fist closed, refusing to allow the henna to be applied until her future mother-in-law placed a gift, typically a gold coin, in her palm.[4] This small act of ritualized resistance was a symbolic negotiation, allowing the bride to assert her value one last time before formally joining the groom's family. Once applied, the henna acted as a protective amulet, safeguarding her during the liminal and spiritually dangerous transition from one social state to another.

2.2 The Grand Celebration: Community, Music, and Feasting

Pre-modern Kurdish weddings were monumental communal events, with some celebrations

lasting for as long as three or even seven days and nights.[3] The entire village or tribe was expected to participate, reinforcing the principle that a marriage was a concern of the whole community, not just the two families involved.

Music and dance were the vibrant heart of the celebration. The powerful, rhythmic sounds of the *saz* (a long-necked stringed instrument) and the *dohol* (a large, double-headed drum) provided a continuous soundtrack for the festivities.[10] The primary form of dance was the *Halparke* (also known as *Govend*), a dynamic communal circle or line dance. Villagers would link hands, pinky fingers, or place their arms around each other's shoulders, moving as one in intricate, synchronized steps. The energetic and unified movement of the *Halparke* is a physical embodiment of social solidarity and collective joy.[18] A pivotal moment in the celebration was when the bride and groom joined the dance circle. They would often take the position at the head of the line, leading the dance while holding a colorful, decorated handkerchief (
desmal), a public display of their new, elevated status as a married couple.[6]

Generous feasting was a critical component of the wedding, serving as a display of the host family's hospitality and wealth. Unlike in many other cultures where a single meal is served, Kurdish weddings often involved providing both lunch and dinner for all guests over the course of the celebration, which could start in the morning and continue late into the night.[3] In some regions, such as Lailin, the festivities were augmented by traditional sports. Matches of *Chookheh* wrestling, a form of jacket wrestling, were organized to entertain guests and provide a venue for young men to display their strength and masculine prowess.[10] Other celebratory activities, such as horseback riding and celebratory gunfire, added to the festive and epic atmosphere of the occasion.[3]

2.3 The Bride's Journey: Procession and Symbolic Transition

The climax of the wedding ceremony was the procession to bring the bride (*Bûk*) from her father's house to her new home with the groom (*Zava*). This journey was not merely a physical transfer but a profound symbolic transition from one kinship group and social domain to another, marked by a series of powerful rituals.

The departure from the natal home was a highly emotional and significant moment. Before leaving, the bride was prepared by a female representative from the groom's family.[3] A key ritual was the tying of a sash or "maidenhood belt" around her waist. This was typically done by her brother, often the youngest, or another close male relative.[3] This act served as a final, symbolic embrace of her natal family's protection and a public affirmation of her purity as she embarked on her new life. After bidding a formal farewell to her parents, she was escorted out of the house, her hands held by her brothers, signifying their role in formally transferring her from their care to her husband's.[3]

In pre-modern times, the journey itself was a spectacle. The bride often rode on a horse or mule that had been lavishly decorated with colorful woven textiles (*jajim*), bells, beads, and

tassels.[3] The groom would walk alongside the horse or meet the procession as it approached his home, accompanied by a joyous crowd of young people dancing and celebrating to the music of the
saz and *dohol*.[10]
The arrival at the groom's house was orchestrated with a series of rites designed to ensure a prosperous future and to formally incorporate the bride into her new home. As the procession neared, the groom would often climb to a high vantage point, such as the roof of his house, and shower the bride and the crowd below with symbolic gifts. This act, known as *Shabash*, involved throwing apples and pomegranates (ancient symbols of fertility and love), as well as sweets and coins (symbolizing a sweet life and prosperity).[3] At the very threshold of the house, a final set of rituals was performed to welcome the bride and ward off any evil influences. These often included the sacrifice of an animal, typically a sheep or goat, at her feet; the breaking of a pot or glass filled with water, sweets, or grain to symbolize abundance and the breaking of any negative forces; and having the bride kiss a copy of the Quran before she stepped over the threshold for the first time.[3] These acts ritually cleansed the transition and formally marked her entry and incorporation into the new domestic and social sphere.

2.4 Adornment and Identity: Traditional Wedding Attire and Jewelry

The bride's wedding attire was a spectacular display of cultural identity, social status, and family wealth. Eschewing the white dress of Western traditions, the pre-modern Kurdish bride was a vision in vibrant color, adorned in layered traditional garments and heavy, meaningful jewelry.[3]
The ensemble typically consisted of several layers. A long dress was worn over wide, baggy trousers, often made of shimmering fabric. Over the dress, the bride would wear one or more ornate, embroidered vests or jackets, known by regional names such as *Sakhmeh*, *Kawa*, or *Solte*.[3] The fabrics were rich and colorful, and the embroidery was intricate, often taking months or years to complete. The selection and preparation of the wedding fabrics was a ritual in itself, with a group of women from both families making a special trip to the bazaar to choose the materials.[6]
The jewelry was as important as the clothing and was laden with symbolic and economic significance. It was not merely decorative but a public statement of the bride's value and the economic standing of the families being joined in alliance. Key pieces included:

- **The *Fis***: This was a distinctive cloth cap or headdress that was densely covered with old silver or gold coins.[3] These were not generic tokens but often historical currency, such as Ottoman or Persian coins from the eras of Naser al-Din Shah and Ahmad Shah, passed down through generations. The
  Fis served as both a stunning adornment and a form of tangible, portable wealth for the bride.
- **The *Bazen***: These were wide, heavy bracelets, usually made of bronze or silver, that could cover a significant portion of the bride's forearms. They signified strength, status,

and the wealth of her family.[3]

- **Belts and Necklaces**: An ornate belt (*Takban*) would cinch the waist, while multiple necklaces made of old beads, amber, and more coins would adorn her chest.[3]

  This complete adornment transformed the bride into a living symbol of her community's heritage, prosperity, and artistic traditions.

Section 3: The Aftermath and the New Beginning: Post-Wedding Integration

The conclusion of the main wedding festivities did not mark the end of the marital process. A series of crucial post-wedding customs followed, designed to solidify the bride's integration into her new family and to formally establish the couple's household within the social fabric of the community. These practices managed the delicate transition from the heightened emotion of the wedding to the daily realities of married life, ensuring the new union was well-supported and fully recognized.

3.1 The First Week: Consolidating the Union

The initial days following the wedding were a critical period of adjustment, particularly for the bride. The ties with her natal family were not abruptly severed but were gradually and ritually redefined. To ease her transition and demonstrate their continued care, it was customary for the bride's family to send cooked meals to the new couple's home for the first three to seven days.[6] This practical support relieved the bride of domestic duties while she accustomed herself to her new environment and kin.

A formal post-wedding visit to the bride's parents was an essential step in completing her social transition. This custom, known in some areas as *Bawan* (meaning "parental home"), would take place after a set period, typically three days or a week.[3] The bride, sometimes accompanied by the groom, would return to her childhood home, not as a resident, but as an honored guest. She would stay for a few days, reconnecting with her family from her new position as a married woman. At the conclusion of this visit, her father would present her with another gift to take back to her marital home.[3] This ritual was highly symbolic: it acknowledged her new, permanent status in her husband's family while affirming that the bonds with her own kin remained, albeit in a new form.

Around a week after the wedding, another important gathering, sometimes called *Hafteh* ("week"), would often be held. This event, frequently attended only by women, was an occasion for invited guests to present their gifts to the new couple.[3] While some gifts were given during the main celebration, this post-wedding gift-giving was a more formal affair where presents, usually cash, were collected to help the couple cover their wedding expenses

and establish their new household financially. This practice served as a form of communal economic support, ensuring the young couple began their life together on a solid footing.

3.2 The Social Fabric: Marriage, Kinship, and Community in Pre-Modern Kurdistan

In synthesizing the rich tapestry of these traditions, it becomes unequivocally clear that the pre-modern Kurdish wedding was a cornerstone of the social order, a sophisticated institution that performed a multitude of functions far beyond the personal union of two people. As observed by travelers and chronicled in ethnographic accounts, these practices were the primary mechanism through which the social, political, and economic life of the community was organized and perpetuated.[8]

First and foremost, marriage was a tool for **forging alliances**. In a politically fragmented landscape often characterized by tribal rivalries, marital ties created crucial bonds of kinship and mutual obligation between families, clans, and tribes. These alliances were essential for defense, economic cooperation, and political influence. The early 20th-century traveler E.B. Soane, for example, noted how marriages were strategically arranged to solidify the alliance between the powerful Jaf tribe and the Ardalan dynasty, a matter of political significance watched closely by the Ottoman authorities.[22]

Second, the wedding was a system for **managing economics**. Through the balanced, reciprocal flows of bride price (*Shirbaha*) and dowry (*Cihêz*), the community regulated the transfer of wealth, property, and labor. This dual system ensured that both families made a significant and public investment in the marriage, creating a powerful incentive for the union's stability and success.

Third, the traditions served to **reinforce the social structure**. The highly ritualized and public nature of the ceremonies affirmed patriarchal authority, the primacy of the kin group over the individual, and the importance of community solidarity. The collective participation in the *Halparke* dance, the communal feasting, and the shared witnessing of each ritual stage bound the community together and reaffirmed its shared values and identity.

Finally, the wedding was a masterfully crafted set of rituals for **navigating life transitions**. It provided a structured, symbolic, and psychologically supportive pathway for individuals, especially the bride, to navigate the profound and often traumatic shift from one identity, one family, and one social world to another. From the ritualized sorrow of the henna night to the protective rites at the threshold of her new home, every step was designed to guide her through the perilous journey of social rebirth.

In conclusion, the pre-modern Kurdish wedding traditions, in all their regional diversity and symbolic complexity, represent a powerful expression of cultural resilience. They reveal a deep, time-honored understanding of the social engineering required to maintain order, create cohesion, and perpetuate a unique cultural identity in a challenging and often turbulent world.

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