

Marriage, Markets, and Merchants: Changes in Wedding Feasts and Household Consumption Patterns in Rural Kazakhstan

Cynthia Werner

Cynthia Werner is visiting assistant professor in the Department of Anthropology at the University of Iowa.

In recent years, economic anthropologists have become increasingly interested in the relationship between consumption and social experience, especially in connection with the consumption of global commodities (Friedman 1994; Miller 1987, 1995; Rutz and Orlove 1989; Tobin 1992). Throughout the world, goods such as food and clothing are used in distinct ways by different social groups and classes (Bourdieu 1984; Douglas and Isherwood 1979; Weismantel 1988). The recent anthropological literature on consumption stresses that preferences do not simply reflect social and cultural diversity. Rather, consumption is an activity that can create and change social relationships and systems of meaning (Miller 1987; Rutz and Orlove 1989; Wilk 1994). By emphasizing the social component of consumption, scholars have brought attention to the various motives for consuming particular goods and the contested meanings assigned to this behavior. And, since local cultural meanings are attached to the consumption of outside goods, they argue that consumption does not signify a naive emulation of Western culture or a loss of local cultural authenticity (Miller 1995; Wilk 1994).

In rural Kazakhstan, large ceremonial feasts for weddings and circumcisions provide a valuable lens for observing the link between household consumption and social relationships. Conspicuous consumption—and conspicuous exchange—are a central part of these feasts. Despite the perception and reality of economic hardship during the post-Soviet transition to a market economy, rural Kazaks have continued to spend large portions of their income and resources at frequent, extravagant feasts. Most rural Kazaks estimate that over half of their household income is spent on feast gifts.¹ Elsewhere I examine how the exchange of gifts and labors at ritual events helps rural Kazaks maintain invaluable household networks (Werner 1997). In this paper, I focus on the meanings behind the consumption and exchange of foods and objects, respectively, at wedding feasts. I am particularly interested in the ways rural Kazaks use both local and

imported goods to establish social status and identity in the post-Soviet period. Examples are taken from the various foods and gifts associated with wedding feasts and festivities. In the following section, I provide a brief description of marriage in rural Kazakhstan, followed by a more thorough treatment of the foods and gifts exchanged at Kazak weddings.

Marriage in the Rural Regions of Southern Kazakhstan

In the pre-Soviet past, the vast majority of marriages were arranged by the parents of the bride and groom. Occasionally, a bride was kidnapped as a means to retaliate against an enemy tribe, or alternatively, as a way to punish a girl's father who was demanding excessive bridewealth (Taizhanov 1995). In the 1920s, both forms of marriage were legally banned in a comprehensive set of laws "against the crimes of custom" (Massell 1974).² Although the nature of Kazak marriages changed significantly during the 70-odd years of Soviet rule, neither form of marriage was eradicated. In the villages, even marriages that were formed with the mutual consent of both spouses were described by Kazaks in terms of arranged marriages (*quda tusu*) or marriages by abduction (*alyp qashu*).

In the rural region where I conducted fieldwork, the majority of marriages (approximately 80 percent) in the past few decades consisted of marriages by abduction.³ The Kazaks use the same word, *alyp qashu* (literally "to take and run"), to describe marriages when a bride elopes with her boyfriend or when a bride is forcibly kidnapped by a stranger or an undesired groom. Formally arranged marriages (*quda tusu*)—the predominant path to marriage in the pre-Soviet period—now occur less frequently and are generally associated with more affluent households. Most arranged marriages now involve the consent of the bride and groom. Moreover, it is not uncommon for the betrothal negotiations to begin only after the groom tells his parents he wishes to marry a particular girl.

Kazak youths claim that the *alyp qashu* form of marriage occurs more frequently because it requires less negotiation, time, and money. The groom's family is still expected to pay bridewealth (about \$200 in 1994) and to sponsor a feast, but

the amount is not negotiated between the two sides, and it is significantly less than the bridewealth for an arranged marriage (about \$1,000). Brides conspire their own kidnappings for varying reasons. Many brides elope with their parents' consent to avoid the high cost of a second wedding feast (*qyz uzatu toi*) at the bride's home. Other brides elope to marry a boyfriend their parents do not admire. And, finally, a small number of brides elope to stifle gossip about a premarital pregnancy. Immediately after a girl is kidnapped, there is some question whether she will "stay." In practice, they almost always do. Obviously, brides who conspire their own kidnappings stay because they truly want to marry the groom. Meanwhile, brides who are forcibly kidnapped stay for a different set of reasons. After the kidnapping, whether or not she is physically violated, a girl's virginity is symbolically (and, in rare cases, actually) lost in the eyes of the community. Since this decreases her chances of marrying in the future and negatively affects her family's reputation, most girls choose to stay. Their decision—and their parent's reluctant acquiescence—can also be explained by the general belief that it is dangerous to tempt fate.

In Table 1, I have outlined the general sequence of festivities and exchanges associated with the alyp qashu form of marriage. The order of activities is almost the reverse for arranged marriages, but the festivities and meanings attached to them are nearly identical.⁴ In the alyp qashu form of marriage, the process begins with the bride's kidnapping and the subsequent dispatch of an apology delegation (*keshirim*) to the bride's house. During the first night, there is limited interaction between the relatives of the bride and groom. The apology delegation consists of approximately three individuals. An equivalent number returns to the groom's house to spend the initial night with the bride and her new family. After a night of semi-seclusion with other youths in a back room of her new home, the bride is formally presented to her husband's relatives during the *betashar* celebration the following day.

After this ceremony, the bride assumes the role of dutiful daughter-in-law (*kelin*) and both families begin separate preparations for a large wedding feast. The bride's family amasses a large array of goods for her dowry, while the groom's family activates its household network to provide the financial resources and necessary labor assistance to sponsor a feast. If the groom's family has fewer resources, there is usually a longer delay. The wedding feast (*uileni toi*) is the core consumption ritual in the marriage process: both families' networks of relatives and friends are invited to celebrate the occasion. In addition to hosting the wedding feast, the groom's family may choose to sponsor a day of horse games. Finally, after the feast, both sets of in-laws are expected to host an intimate matchmaker's party in honor of their new relatives.

Social Identity and the Consumption of Food at Kazak Weddings

The display and consumption of large quantities of food is a core element during the wedding festivities. Like other Muslims, the Kazaks take great pride in hospitality. In practice, entertaining guests is impossible without the preparation and presentation of special foods. For example, if no guests are present, a family typically offers a simple lunch of soup with bread and tea. If a neighbor or relative arrives, the family extends basic hospitality. Cups of hot tea and the existing meal are offered and a fresh salad might be prepared. However, if an unexpected guest arrives, more provisions are made. A plate of butter and a tray with candies, cookies, and peanuts are served immediately, placed on the table next to bread and sugar. Then, women and girls begin to prepare a more substantial meal for their guests. In certain circumstances, the family will first slaughter a sheep to celebrate a guest's arrival.

At ritual events, the presentation of food varies according to the host household's wealth and social status. To maintain prestige, the wealthy are expected to be generous in hospitality and gift-giving. The quantity and quality of foods are discussed by guests as they evaluate a feast's success. To maintain or improve their social status, the host household seeks to provide as much food as it can afford. Tribal kinsmen also have a stake in this matter; they readily offer physical labor and financial capital.

Table 2 indicates how objects found in daily life—and ritual life—typically differ from the wealthiest to the poorest households. In rural Kazakhstan, there are no strict class divisions, like those that exist between landowners and wage laborers. However, households are distinguished by wealth and prestige. Because opportunities to own private land did not exist before 1989, wealth and status correlate with occupation rather than land ownership. The wealthy normally hold positions of power, such as state farm directors. Poor households generally consist of young couples with small children and no private livestock.

In the middle column of Table 2, I have delineated the general differences in the foods served at the wedding feasts of affluent and poor households. In general, the quantity of food is much greater for wealthier households that invite more guests and serve more meat per guest. There are also qualitative differences: wealthy households often provide factory-produced goods, including candies, cookies, and alcohol, while poor ones make food or buy homemade foods.

In recent years, the removal of government restrictions on foreign trade has led to the introduction of many new foods in the village bazaar. The assortment includes packaged cookies, candies, soft drinks, powdered drink mixes, and baby formula. Many goods originate in Iran and Turkey, but

Table 1
Consumption and Exchange at Wedding Festivities (*Alyp Qashu* Form of Marriage)

	BRIDE'S HOUSE		GROOM'S HOUSE
Day One		-----> <i>Daughter</i>	Arrival of Bride - w/ groom + several close friends
Several hrs later	Apology Delegation (3-4 of groom's relatives)	<----- <i>Qalynmal</i> (<i>Bridewealth</i>) + <i>Keshirim</i> (<i>Apology Fee</i>)	Bride's First Night - bride is kept in room w/ young people - 3-5 kin from bride's side plus about 50 of groom's kin and neighbors
Day Two	Receive Guests - all day, stream of neighbors and relatives		Betashar Ceremony - 50-100 of groom's relatives - bride's face is revealed to new kin
For about 1 mo - 1 yr	Preparation of Dowry - with financial and labor help of relatives & friends Display of Dowry (<i>Tosek koru beru</i>) - female relatives and friends of bride's mother		Preparation for Wedding Feast - organize labor network - take interest-free loans from friends & relatives - buy gifts for new in-laws (<i>kiit</i>)
		-----> <i>Dowry</i>	Wedding Feast (<i>Uilenu Toi</i>) - 150-500 guests arrive w/gifts - 4-5 courses of food are served - toasts, dancing
Usually begins evening of feast		<----- <i>Kiit</i> (<i>Gifts for in-laws</i>)	Matchmakers' Party (<i>Qudalyq</i>) - more intimate party, about 24 hrs - 5-10 reps from bride's family (<i>qudalar</i>) - visit 3-5 houses in groom's family's network - present <i>kiit</i> to <i>qudalar</i>
A few weeks after the feast	Preparation for <i>Qudalyq</i> - buy gifts (<i>kiit</i>)		<i>Kudaiga Shukir</i> - small party to thank Allah and the family's network of labor support
About 1-6 mos later	<i>Qudalyq</i> Party - lasts about 24 hours - 5-10 reps from groom's family - visit 3-5 houses in bride's family's network - present <i>kiit</i>	-----> <i>Kiit</i> (<i>Gifts for in-laws</i>)	Sponsor <i>Kokpar</i> or <i>Baige</i> Horse Games - 100-300 men participate in afternoon events with livestock prizes for "goals"

are purchased by village merchants in the nearby cities of Shymkent, Turkestan, and Tashkent. As indicated in Table 2, wealthy households have started to incorporate these into

their wedding festivities. The products' use does not displace the significance of meat courses, but has served to embellish the preexisting assortment of side dishes.

Table 2
Sample Dowry for Above-Average Household, 1994

Item	Approximate Cost*	Origin
RUGS		
2 imported factory-made wall rugs	10,000 tenge	Bought in Shymkent
2 rugs for floor	2,500 tenge	Bought in Shymkent
1 rug for floor	gift	Gift from mother's friend
1 hand-made Kazak felt rug	gift	Made by father's sister
FURNITURE		
2 chests (<i>sandyq</i>)	700 tenge	Bought in Turkestan
Imported color television	gift	Gift from mother's brother's family
HOUSEHOLD GOODS		
Complete tea service	800 tenge	Bought in village store
Extra teacups	gift	Gift from mother's friend
2 small teapots	200 tenge	Bought in village store
Set of bowls	300 tenge	Bought in village store
Gold silverware	unknown	Bought in Shymkent
Regular silverware	unknown	Bought in Shymkent
Large china bowl	unknown	
Large china platter	unknown	
10 homemade comforters (<i>korpe</i>)	3,000 tenge	Sewn by father's sisters-in-law
5 mattresses (<i>korpeshe</i>)	2,100 tenge	Sewn by father's sisters-in-law
4 pillows	500 tenge	Sewn by father's sisters-in-law
2 large bath towels	200 tenge	Bought in Turkestan
2 hand towels	50 tenge	Bought in Turkestan
CLOTHING		
Imported llama-wool coat	11,500 tenge	Bought in Shymkent
Fur hat	7,000 tenge	Bought in Shymkent
Karakul coat	1,500 tenge	Bought in Turkestan
Karakul cap	500 tenge	Bought in Turkestan
Leather jacket	1,000 tenge	
3 pairs of boots	1,500 tenge	
5 pairs of shoes	2,000 tenge	
10 dresses/outfits (both imported and hand-made by local seamstress)	6,000 tenge	
4 headscarfs	200 tenge	Bought in village bazaar
Pair of slippers	50 tenge	
Nightgown	100 tenge	
Bathrobe	80 tenge	
TOTAL	49,780 tenge + (approximately \$995 U.S. dollars)	
	BRIDEPRICE = 10,000 tenge	

* Some of these prices represent average price observed in bazaar rather than actual price paid by this household.

The meaning attached to new foods varies within the community. On one hand, frequent consumers take great pride in their purchases and relate their use to their family's material success. During the present period of economic transition and social stratification, it is important for the elite to

demonstrate its unchanging status in the social order. The conspicuous consumption of expensive imports provides one avenue for maintaining this image. In this regard, the reputation and behavior of the Kazak elite—in urban and rural areas—mirrors the image of the "New Russians." Although

Table 4
List of *Kiit* Gifts Received at Matchmakers' Party

***Kiit* Gifts Received by Participants in Matchmakers' Party:**

Father of Bride

- camel (immediately sold in bazaar because they are difficult to keep)
- Soviet-made suit
- dress shirts, sums of money (presented by other relatives and neighbors of groom's family)

Mother of Bride

- cow
- long fake fur coat
- sequined material, velvet material, headscarfs and sums of cash (presented by other relatives' family)

Mother's Brother

- "paper" horse, approximately \$100 in tenge
- imported coat
- dress shirts, sums of money (presented by other relatives of groom's family)

Mother's Brother's Wife

- 100 dollar bill (the family had originally purchased a Soviet-made coat for this individual, but was convinced that a more substantial gift was required for this wealthy in-law)
- material, scarves and sums of money (presented by other relatives of groom's family)

Mother's Sister

- Soviet coat
- material, scarves and sums of money (presented by other relatives of groom's family)

Father's Brother

- Soviet suit
- sums of cash (presented by other relatives of groom's family)

Father's Brother's Wife

- Soviet coat
- material, scarves and sums of money (presented by other relatives of groom's family)

***Kiit* Gifts Received During Matchmaker Party on Behalf of Nonparticipant:**

Bride's Youngest Brother

- young horse (the same horse was given to the groom's younger brother at the next *qudalyq*)

Mother's Brother's Son

- Soviet-made suit

Mother's Brother's Daughter-in-Law

- sequined material

***Kiit* Gifts Received by Bride's Relatives on Other Occasions:**

Bride's Younger Brother (received when he spent first night with bride)

- horse

Bride's Sister-in-Law (received when she spent first night with bride)

- sequined material

goods can be explained by a Soviet ideology that "insisted on the citizen's conscious identification with the activity of the state."

Consumption in rural Kazakstan, however, cannot be reduced to a simple dichotomy between the "haves" who

desire foreign goods and the "have-nots" who prefer local goods. In the middle are numerous status-conscious households that try to emulate the behavior of wealthy households, but lack the financial means. These households, for example, might purchase the same package of powdered drink mix,

but—to save money—will add more water than the label specifies. The final product appears the same as sweet drinks consumed by the wealthy, but the taste is like water.

Though imported goods are beginning to change the content of feast foods, the nomadic heritage of the Kazaks has continued to provide stability in contemporary cuisine. Although the Kazaks were forced to settle in the 1930s, many of Kazakstan's collective and state farms are devoted to livestock production. In addition, most rural households continue to raise privately owned livestock. Meat from pastoral animals is the essence of all Kazak dishes. The highest cultural preference is bestowed on horse meat; it is believed to have special curative powers. Though horse meat is restricted to specific dishes, beef and mutton can readily substitute for one another. Sheep and horse heads are routinely presented to male guests of honor, and specific cuts of meat are sometimes offered to culturally determined categories of relatives. Horse and camel milk is also served.

Chicken and fish now occupy a unique place in the cuisine, though they did not play a significant role in the pre-Soviet diets of Kazak nomads. They are not considered main entrees and are not served on a daily basis. Boiled chicken and fried fish are reserved for ritual events and are served as cold appetizers before hot, meaty courses. Finally, eggs are consumed daily by families that raise chickens. But they are viewed as a poor substitute for meat and are never served at ritual events.

Conspicuous Exchange at Kazak Weddings

Throughout wedding festivities, the objects of gift exchange are used to display and negotiate differences in social status and continuity within "traditional" Kazak culture. Items of particular importance are: the objects exchanged in a girl's dowry; the objects presented by guests to the host household during the wedding feast; and the objects exchanged by each set of in-laws at the two matchmaker parties. In the third column of Table 3, I have listed the various types of gifts presented to the host household during the wedding feast. The actual gift depends on many factors, including the relationships between the giver and the recipient, previous gifts and services exchanged, and potential gifts currently possessed by the giving household. Wealthy and status-conscious households are more likely to give commodities or cash than home-produced goods like felt rugs or livestock.

In Table 2, I have recorded items of a sample dowry for a girl from an above-average household. Table 4 lists the matchmaker gifts (*kiit*) presented to this girl's relatives. Like food, the nature of in-law gifts and dowry items forms an important part of village gossip. Neighbors rigorously debate how the assembled gifts compare at dowry or matchmaker

parties. Visitors are normally shown gifts before and after they are bestowed and are asked whether the goods are sufficient. The dowry display even entails a formal preview party sponsored by the bride's mother. In Table 4, I include one case where a guest suggested that a particular Soviet-produced coat was an inadequate matchmaker gift (*kiit*) for the bride's wealthy maternal aunt. So, a hundred-dollar bill was given instead. For matchmaker gifts and dowry items, the exchange of imported goods is becoming more commonplace. Imported goods—highly coveted but rarely accessible in the past—are now expected by those who are more affluent. Foreign (factory-produced) rugs and clothing provide preferred substitutes for local handicrafts and Soviet-produced clothing. In many respects, these new goods are filling a niche previously occupied by certain Soviet factories that were renowned for producing high-quality goods. In the Western literature, scholars rarely acknowledged that Soviet consumer goods varied in quality, as they do elsewhere. With the independence of Kazakstan, and the concurrent economic upheaval throughout the former Soviet empire, many old goods no longer reach Kazakstani markets. The local elite are now replacing prestigious items of the past with new goods imported from Asia and Europe.

In conclusion, this paper highlights the changes occurring in the use of objects at Kazak wedding festivities. The local preference for goods has changed with the expansion of trade routes. In general, the use of imported goods in daily life and ritual events is associated with wealthier households. The meanings attached to the consumption of imported goods varies within the community. Middle-level households often seek to emulate the consumption patterns of the wealthy in hopes of gaining status and prestige. The process of further social stratification has intensified the level of competition in feasting and gift giving among the local elite. And the same process has generated resentment among poor households who find it more and more difficult to continue participating in the ritual economy.

References Cited

- Bennett, Diane O.
1989 Saints and Sweets: Class and Consumption Ritual in Rural Greece. In *The Social Economy of Consumption*. Henry J. Rutz and Benjamin S. Orlove, eds. Pp. 177-209. Lanham, Md.: University Press of America.
- Bourdieu, Pierre
1984 *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*. Translated by Richard Nice. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Douglas, Mary, and Baron Isherwood
1979 *The World of Goods*. New York: Basic Book Publishers.

- Friedman, Jonathan
1994 *Consumption and Identity*. Chur, Switzerland: Harwood Academic Publishers.
- Humphrey, Caroline
1995 *Creating a Culture of Disillusionment: Consumption in Moscow, a Chronicle of Changing Times*. In *Worlds Apart: Modernity Through the Prism of the Local*. Daniel Miller, ed. Pp. 43-68. New York: Routledge Press.
- Massell, Gregory
1974 *The Surrogate Proletariat*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press.
- Miller, Daniel
1987 *Material Culture and Mass Consumption*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Miller, Daniel, ed.
1995 *Acknowledging Consumption: A Review of New Studies*. New York: Routledge Press.
- Rutz, Henry J.
1989 *Culture, Class and Consumer Choice: Expenditures on Food in Urban Fijian Households*. In *The Social Economy of Consumption*. Monographs in Economic Anthropology, No. 6. Henry J. Rutz and Benjamin S. Orlove, eds. Pp. 211-251. Lanham, Md.: University Press of America.
- Rutz, Henry J., and Benjamin S. Orlove, eds.
1989 *The Social Economy of Consumption*. Monographs in Economic Anthropology, No. 6. Lanham, Md.: University Press of America.
- Taizhanov, G. E.
1995 *Kazakhi: Istorikho-etnograficheskoye issledovaniye [The Kazakhs: A Historical and Ethnographic Study]*. Almaty: Kazakhstan.
- Tobin, Joseph J., ed.
1992 *Re-Made in Japan: Everyday Life and Consumer Taste in a Changing Society*. New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press.
- Weismantel, M. J.
1988 *Food, Gender and Poverty in the Ecuadorian Andes*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Werner, Cynthia
1997 *Household Networks, Ritual Exchange and Economic Change in Rural Kazakstan*. Ph.D. dissertation, Indiana University.
- Wilk, Richard
1994 *Consumer Goods as Dialogue About Development: Colonial Time and Television Time in Belize*. In *Consumption and Identity*. Jonathan Friedman, ed. Pp. 97-109. Chur, Switzerland: Harwood Academic Publishers.

Acknowledgments

This paper is based on 22 months of fieldwork in Kazakstan, including 13 months in a rural region of Southern Kazakstan province. Three separate research trips were funded by the International Research and Exchanges Board (IREX), the Wenner-Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research, the Social Science Research Council, the Department of Anthropology at Indiana University, and the Center for Global Change and World Peace at Indiana University.

Notes

1. While conducting household surveys, I found it very difficult to determine the actual percent of monthly household income spent on rituals. First, household income is varied and irregular. When I left in August of 1995, most government employees, with the exception of the police, had not received their salaries for six months. Second, some sources of income are not received in cash and their values are not calculated into household income. For example, many state farm workers were given the option of receiving flour or other food products instead of a late cash salary. Also, the family I lived with paid the relative who tilled their private land with clothing, not cash. Third, although households may keep some financial records, such as electricity payments and a list of loans to neighbors, they do not plan or document household income and expenditures, especially in regard to gifts. Fourth, households do not always buy gifts; often, they give something they have on hand, most likely a gift received from someone else. Finally, the feasts are seasonal, and monthly expenditures are much higher in the summer and fall than in the winter and early spring.

2. These laws, first enacted in the Family Code of 1921, also included other bans on marriage practices, such as the levirate, sororate, and child betrothals.

3. Of 212 marriages recorded from different generations, only 47 (22 percent) consisted of formally arranged marriages. In a smaller sample of 51 marriages contracted between 1950 and 1990, there were 4 arranged marriages, 19 alp qashu marriages with the girl's prior consent, and 28 alyp qashu marriages without the girl's prior consent. Of those 28 without prior consent, 8 couples talked frequently—or even dated—prior to the abduction, 13 couples knew one another only slightly, and 7 couples had never spoken.

4. When a marriage is arranged, both matchmaker parties are held before the bride moves into the groom's home. There is an additional wedding feast at the bride's house (qyz uzatu toi), and the bride and her dowry are then taken to the groom's house. The *betashar* ceremony and the wedding feast are held the first day of her arrival.