

## CHAPTER

# 6

## WEDDINGS AS AFFIRMATION OF THE TRANSLocal FAMILY AND KINSHIP



### INTRODUCTION

Weddings are the most significant life-stage celebrations in Kosovo. They are celebrated in the company of large groups of relatives and friends with music, singing and dancing. In Opoja villages, the attendance of migrants is highly desired at wedding celebrations, which often happen in the summer months when migrants are visiting. Summer is when villages take on a new look and a lively atmosphere, as multiple wedding celebrations can be held within a single week. Each wedding celebration lasts up to three days, with loud music blaring across the yard from the groom's house, culminating in the arrival of the bride in a festive motorcade that has escorted her through the narrow village streets, causing numerous traffic jams (E. Krasniqi 2017). These motorcades feature the shiny cars belonging to migrants, whose contribution to these wedding celebrations is apparent on many levels. They may also be the ones getting married, as younger migrants, even those raised abroad, are brought up with the idea of staying connected with the Kosovo-Albanian culture and with relatives 'back home', and a considerable number also choose to marry a partner from Opoja. Many celebrate their weddings in the circle of relatives in their home village – in the *mahalla* or, increasingly, also in the highly luxurious wedding salons that are cropping up on the outskirts of Prizren and the Opoja villages.



**Figure 6.1.** A festive motorcade in Opoja (© Carolin Leutloff-Grandits)

In my conversations with migrants and villagers, which often revolved around weddings, they interpreted the meaning of wedding celebrations differently. Some proudly emphasized the traditional nature of weddings in Opoja, which were celebrated in accordance with decade- or century-long patrilocal customs and the agreements made between families. Several of my interlocutors also claimed that weddings in Opoja lasted longer than in other regions of Kosovo. However, other villagers also acknowledged that the way weddings are celebrated has changed greatly and that the focus is now on individualized practices and consumption. In addition, they criticized the enormous scale of some ceremonies, which they said were beyond the economic reach of many community members. Thus, in their view, weddings are also events where the competitive spirit of the collective comes to the fore.

This chapter takes a closer look at these ambivalent statements and examines the extent to which weddings celebrated in Opoja centre on the family as a collective, following patriarchal and patrilocal patterns, and/or the extent to which they centre on the romantic relationship between the couple, and how wedding celebrations have changed in recent decades. It also examines the extent to which weddings create or reaffirm family and kinship relationships across state borders that form the basis for translocal caring relations. More specifically, it addresses the ways in which weddings create or reinforce ties between Opoja villagers and migrants and within the family and wider kin group, and the ways in which weddings also create an arena for competition and conflict. In order to understand the expressions of kin-

ship and gender relations in the various rituals of wedding celebrations, the analysis of the dimensions of materiality and consumption within weddings is of central importance.

Like other life-stage rituals and highly ritualized rites of passage, weddings represent certain family and partnership values. They often evoke strong emotions, and the shared experiences and memories can create a lasting bond between those involved in a wedding. Wedding ceremonies can serve as a 'social glue', to use the term coined by Steve Vertovec (2004), to strengthen family ties and help restore the 'lifeline' between villages and migration destinations (see also Leutloff-Grandits 2014b). At the same time, the status of individual community members and families can also be renegotiated, not least to enhance the status of the bride and groom and their respective families and relatives. With their potential to channel social change (Van Gennep 1960 [1909]; Fog Olwig 2002; Turner 2005; Holm Pedersen and Rytter 2017), weddings can restore and reshape social structures and values. But as Julia Pauli (2011) notes, once weddings become sites of social distinction and conspicuous consumption, they can also have a fragmenting effect on the community.

Rituals can also contribute to 'placemaking' by expanding the landscape of 'home' beyond the actual place of residence, in the village or abroad, where feelings and practices of belonging can be collectively enacted. Weddings also provide ample space and opportunity to express and renegotiate gendered and generational relations within kin groups and the broader community. As various scholars such as Peggy Levitt (2001), Levitt and Nina Glick Schiller (2004), Ruba Salih (2002), and Marieke van Houte and Tine Davids (2018) have shown, migrants take a very active role in renegotiating these relations by simultaneously investing in and creatively shifting the lines of what is perceived as 'modernity' and 'tradition'.

As a participant observer at numerous weddings in Opoja during my fieldwork, I had the opportunity to grasp the different elements of weddings and to analyse their meaning in relation to kinship and gender roles, individual and family affairs, and notions of 'modernity' and 'tradition'. Furthermore, the analysis relies on numerous conversations about weddings – including those that took place at the joint viewing of the wedding DVD. In fact, the production of a professional wedding DVD is of great importance within the translocal community, as copies can be distributed among relatives and guests and viewed together long after the wedding (Mand 2012). As such, wedding DVDs can bridge time and space. Janet Reineck's (1991) Ph.D. thesis, which documents the period of the late 1980s, has allowed me to grasp diachronically the complexity of weddings in the making of the community.

This chapter argues that in Opoja wedding celebrations can become a unifying force for villagers and migrants alike. However, this is not primarily

done through the use of national symbols and discourses, as Robert Pichler (2009b) describes for Albanians from Veleshta, Northern Macedonia, of whom many live abroad and resort to regional and national markers to bond their geographically dispersed group vis-à-vis their Macedonian neighbours. In Opoja, weddings primarily create an arena in which villagers and migrants reconnect with the family and kinship groups and where new ties are created across geographical locations and state borders by connecting the local to migrant places. The home region and the groom's house are of paramount importance, and this patrilocality is reaffirmed through differentiating between the groom's and the bride's side in ways that reconfigure the gender and kinship roles of the bride and groom. As will be shown, kinship and gender relations are expressed primarily through the clothing worn by women at weddings, as well as through the gifts given to the bride and, more generally, through the costs incurred for the wedding and the perceived or desired social status associated with it. The willingness of family members to use and sometimes pool their financial resources to organize a wedding with hundreds of guests – among them mainly relatives – can also be seen as an expression of specific kinship and gender relations.

A new aspect of the 'modern' wedding is the addition of a celebration in a restaurant or a 'wedding saloon' (*salloni i dasmave*), to prioritize the romantic dimensions of the occasion, and to which also the brides' relatives are invited, which expresses a new balance within the kin group and between individual aspirations and family matters. Migrants are especially active in organizing and financing these weddings, and also in reconstituting and redefining kinship and community relations. However, the high costs associated with such large weddings in Opoja and the increasing importance of consumption as an indicator of social status also reflect neoliberal transformations in Kosovo and around the world. The high costs put pressure on villagers to migrate and families to act as a unit; it can also thwart the plans and ambitions of individual family members and lead to conflict within family and kinship groups, as well as within the local community.

This chapter is divided into five sections. The first section describes the preparations ahead of and during wedding ceremonies in the Opoja region and some key elements of the festivities. I will refer to the family and gender roles of villagers and migrants as well as the challenges of maintaining or enhancing social status through a delicate balance between upholding notions of tradition and modernity/innovation. The second section focuses on the dresses worn at weddings as markers of gender and generational relations within the kinship and community group. This analytical line is continued in the third section, which deals with the climax of the wedding, the so-called bridal-fetching ceremony. The fourth section then analyses the social economy of weddings and the links between wedding celebrations, migration

and prospects. The final section focuses on a relatively new development in the Opoja region, namely weddings celebrated at 'modern' venues, such as restaurants and wedding salons, and the resultant modifications made to 'traditional' wedding rituals.

### THE STAGING OF A WEDDING

Jetmir, who had been living abroad for almost ten years, celebrated his wedding in Opoja in the summer of 2011. He had met his bride through a cousin from one of the neighbouring villages in Opoja; she had caught his eye during a visit in 2008. Since Jetmir had to return to Germany after the engagement to earn enough money for the wedding expenses, the preparation of the wedding was largely in the hands of Jetmir's family in Opoja. Jetmir's parents envisioned a wedding according to local customs, similar to their other sons' weddings a few years earlier, celebrated in their courtyard in the company of about 300 relatives, which included the patrilineal and patrilocal relatives (*fis*), the daughters of the house and their families, as well as the relatives of the in-married women (*miqësi*). In line with traditional customs, which are still largely followed in Opoja, the bride's family and relatives are not invited to the wedding festivities at the groom's place. Instead, the bride's family organizes their own traditional rituals and gatherings in the bridal home until the bride is sent off to the groom's family. The celebrations in the groom's home with his family are to welcome the new bride and are generally joyful and exuberant, while the celebrations at the bride's house are modest in comparison. In what follows, therefore, I will focus mainly on the preparations and celebrations on the groom's side and only occasionally turn the focus to the celebrations at the bride's house.

Jetmir's family had to make vital decisions about the financing of the wedding and started preparations months ahead of the celebration while Jetmir was still abroad. Jetmir's brothers and his father spent weeks renovating the house and adding an extra bedroom. His brothers also assisted financially with the costs of the bridal gifts and other wedding expenses. Jetmir's two sisters-in-law went on several shopping sprees to the nearby town of Prizren (occasionally in the company of the bride) for the bridal gifts and necessary bridal outfit. In addition to a very elaborate white wedding dress, they also bought a second, more moderate white dress and a 'traditional' wedding costume as well as several elegant evening gowns and ensembles as a part of the bridal trousseau, which the bride could wear after the wedding to welcome the guests of her in-laws, or to attend other wedding celebrations in Opoja. This consists of Turkish-style pants made of several meters of white lace (*dimia*), a long, embroidered velvet jacket (*dallama*), a short, embroidered

velvet jacket (*jelek*) and a blouse, which brides wore mainly until the 1980s, and occasionally in the 1990s, and which are now worn by wedding guests.

All in all, the groom's family tends to spend a few 1,000 euros on clothes and diverse items such as shoes, gold jewellery, underwear, nightgowns, bedding and makeup for the bride. Within Opoja's translocal community, these gifts from the groom's family to the bride symbolize the 'value' or status of the bride and the success and status of the groom's family and are therefore indispensable. In addition, Jetmir's sisters-in-law and his mother immersed themselves in their knitting and embroidery projects for the accessories, such as the complex floral decoration for the blouse and the headdress for the traditional bridal gown. Although this work is a relatively new invention, it is considered a speciality of the region and greatly valued by the migrants, who buy these handmade pieces from village women (see Chapter 1).

In Opoja, the wedding festivities organized by the groom's family begin with the arrival of the groom's close circle of relatives a few days before the groom's family picks up the bride from her parents' home, which marks the climax of the wedding. The wedding festivities are accompanied by the distinct sound of Turkish-style wedding music, which resounds for many hours a day from loudspeakers in the groom's family courtyard and can be heard throughout the *mahalla*. In addition, girls and women from the *mahalla* who are related to the groom's family periodically dance in a circle and sing wedding songs praising the groom, his *farefis* (close male kin group), his *fis* (wider male kin group) and the entire village. The women sing to the rhythmic beat of the *def* (tambourine), which is common in all Albanian-speaking regions and of which there is also a variant in Greece. The singing and dancing inside the yard and in front of the house add to the cheerfulness of the wedding festivities, lasting days.

As a part of the community-building process, such performances also enhance the status of the groom's family. Most impressive, however, is the music performance of a band of musicians from Prizren, who belong to a subgroup of Roma in Kosovo, locally (and often pejoratively) called *magjup* (Malcolm 1998: 2005; Lichnofski 2013, 2015), and are famous for this style of music. The band comprises one or several musicians playing the *curle*, a kind of loud and penetrating oboe found mainly in this region. In addition to the *curle* players, two or three musicians play the *tubana* or *lodra*, a larger cylindrical drum, which punctuates the festivities with a loud banging sound and is thus significant as an accompaniment to the local dances.

The *magjup* band also accompanies the singing, dancing and screaming of the men of the groom's family and extended kin, which is performed on the street closest to the groom's house, offering a public expression of the unity among the male relatives and within the common patriline. This also allows various male community members to enhance their own social sta-



**Figure 6.2.** *Magjup* musicians playing at the bride's arrival (© Carolin Leutloff-Grandits)

tus. Some men in the family beckon the *magjup* musicians to play for them individually. The *magjup* musicians then organize performances dedicated to them and in dialogue with them, honouring their special status on this occasion and in the community. At the end of the performance, the person commissioning the show affixes an amount of money he deems appropriate to the musicians' headdresses in full view of all the guests. Since the musicians receive advanced payment for the music played at a wedding, this extra money highlights the payer's personal status and the importance he attaches to the festivities.

At the wedding celebrations I observed, the amounts of money given ranged from five euros to 100 euros, and in rare cases more, for a music show, even though they lasted only a few minutes. Villagers expect migrants to finance such a show, which puts pressure on them to 'buy' their way into their own kin group and village community. The musicians often know who has money because they play at the various weddings in the region and are therefore well acquainted with the families in Opoja, including the migrants. They therefore approach these people with their music and put on a show – a couple of songs – in their honour. The fact that male migrants and non-migrants come together in a competitive spirit to 'waste' money



**Figure 6.3.** Relatives dancing the *valle* at a wedding (© Carolin Leutloff-Grandits)

on these music shows indicates the status it holds. Such spending sometimes puts villagers in the difficult position of not being able to participate or having to go into debt.

Generally, the *magjup* musicians perform in the village street for the male members of the family and kin group, as mentioned. Inside the yard, the *magjup* musicians accompany the traditional circle dance (*valle*) headed by a close member of the groom's family and including many guests and family members, especially women and girls. The circle dance goes on for hours, some dropping out of the chain and others joining in. The never-ending circling with repeated movements has the effect of creating a bond between the dancers and merging them into a community. When migrants take an especially active role in the dance and celebrate exuberantly, for instance, by paying the *magjup* musicians to play extra hours, they show their special appreciation.

On the second day of the wedding, the men in the family – the groom's father, brothers, uncles and cousins, but not the groom himself – bring bridal gifts over to the bride's home. In exchange, the groom's relatives receive a trousseau from the bride, which mainly consists of handmade tablecloths and a gift for each member of the groom's household. Women who continue with their education and therefore do not engage in needlework before marriage also adhere to that tradition, for which they rely on close female relatives, like their mother, aunt or even sister, who produce these handmade items for them, or they buy such items in town. It is the groom's 'best men' that return with the trousseau to the groom's home, often accompanied by music, singing and dancing and a joint meal with the present guests.





**Figure 6.4.** Exhibition of gifts during the *kënnagjegji* (© Carolin Leutloff-Grandits)

Simultaneously, as mentioned above, the bride's family conducts festivities in her natal home separately. With the help of her girlfriends and female relatives, the bride will arrange the gifts she has been receiving from the groom's family since the engagement, in the living room. All village girls are invited to view these gifts. As already observed by Janet Reineck (1991: 80–91) for the late 1980s, exhibiting the groom's gifts forms part of the bride's farewell ritual from her home (*kënnagjegji*), which she celebrates with her female relatives and her close, mainly unmarried, girlfriends and other women of her *mahalla*. The guests' inspection of the groom's gifts – for their size, quality and taste – is a crucial moment in renegotiating and reshaping the status of the bride's and the groom's family.

On the third day, the wedding festivities reach their climax when the groom's family and relatives pick up the bride from her home and bring her to the groom's house. On this very day, hundreds of guests, mainly the groom's relatives, arrive late morning at the groom's house to participate in this ritual. The sequence of the entry of the guests and their positioning or seating upon arrival are organized according to gender and family status. The women enter first and remain in the yard of the groom's house, while the male guests gather in the courtyard of a relative next door, usually a pater-



**Figure 6.5.** Women and children having lunch together at a wedding in Opoja (© Carolin Leutloff-Grandits)

nal uncle (*xhaxhai*) of the groom. Although, or precisely because, family members are dispersed across borders, and family life is fragmented and rife with competition and individualism, the groom's family relies on the unity of their extended family (*shtëpia e madhe*) and on their relatives' support in organizing the wedding in the yard and serving lunch to all guests.

Migrants play an important role in revitalizing and transforming wedding festivities and the social roles ascribed therein. The *vallja e burrave*, a sophisticated group dance exclusively for men based on elaborate step configurations and rhythms that demonstrate male seniority, honour and skill, exemplifies the difference migrants make. For the dance, the men of the groom's *mahalla* usually gather in the courtyard of a paternal relative during the wedding, with no female spectators; the dance is specific to the region, although it varies from village to village.<sup>1</sup>

The dance I observed as a researcher at the invitation of the men included a young migrant along with only a few other, mostly elderly men. The latter expressed their respect for the dance and for tradition in the way they synchronized their movements to the beat set by the most senior man, while the migrant's dance moves conspicuously set him apart from the others. He was not well-versed in traditional dance, and his general conduct was at odds with the other men, who exuded calmness as they followed the lead of the main dancer. Flamboyantly dressed, with sunglasses, the migrant performed his own version of the dance, mixing it with some new movements. At times he even managed to convince the others to imitate his movements. Even

though he expressed his enthusiastic appreciation for the traditional dance, he also undermined its rhythm and cadence through his improvisations. While his performance may have irritated some, especially younger spectators reacted with a surprised smile. In the end, this young migrant gave 100 euros to the *magjup* musicians, a much higher amount than what the others gave. It seemed both a way of compensating for undermining the seniority and skilfulness of the other dancers and expressing his appreciation for the dance. As also shown by Ruba Salih (2002: 219) in relation to Moroccan migrants who perform rituals 'back home', migrants 'develop a creative interplay with "traditional practices" by subverting, reformulating and giving new creative shape to their meaning and content.'

Even though migrants may be able to introduce new wedding rituals, many still tie in with long-established traditions. Brides and grooms who live abroad receive advice from village relatives on how to behave during the ceremony. Since most weddings in Opoja follow a similar pattern and almost all families in the region invest significantly in their sons' weddings, status differences were once hardly noticeable. However, differences in economic means have become more noticeable in recent years and socially divide the community – a factor that will be discussed in more detail in a later section.

### DRESS CODES AS SIGNIFIERS OF GENDER AND GENERATION, INDIVIDUALISM AND THE PATRILOCAL COLLECTIVE

During the wedding festivities in Opoja, women's dresses and appearance express the individual and the collective, 'modernity' and 'tradition'. As already observed by Bourdieu (1984), dress codes can become a symbolic and visual expression of social status and distinction. In Opoja, that is particularly the case on the day of the bride's pickup, which garners much attention and for which a lot of money is spent. Outfits express the status of individuals and simultaneously the meaning of the patrilocal kin group and the gendered and generational position of individuals within this kinship order.

In preparation for the wedding, various in-married women from the groom's family, as well as all the younger married women among the female guests, visit a stylist, who creates a complicated swept-up hairdo and applies a certain make-up style reserved for married women in the region. The in-married women of the groom's family as well as in the *mahalla* wear the traditional attire prescribed for this occasion, the *dimia*, *dallama* or *jelek* and *këmişë*, a stiff blouse with hand-embroidered flower motifs, which form part of the groom's gift to the bride and cost up to a few thousand euros. They



**Figure 6.6.** Women with handmade headdresses and embroidered blouses at a wedding in Opoja (© Carolin Leutloff-Grandits)

also wear abundant gold jewellery and the handmade flower-headdresses they received at their own weddings. The jewellery and clothing simultaneously emphasize their beauty and marital status, visibly distinguishing not just between unmarried and married women but also between newly married woman (possibly with young children) and women with grown, even married, children.

As a sign of family cohesion and strength, sisters and sisters-in-law sometimes also wear the same traditional costume during wedding festivities. However, most married women wear these traditional costumes only for a couple of hours before changing into a unique and glamorous evening dress, often covered in embroidery and glitter, and combined with high heels. Especially the young in-married women of the house and some female guests repeatedly change their attire throughout the main wedding day. Alternating between Turkish-style *dimias* and Hollywood-style evening dresses makes it possible to blend ‘modernity’ and ‘tradition’, cosmopolitanism and localism, family unity and individualism to create a hybrid wedding style, which, however, in its abundance reflects high costs and consumerism.

The sweeping white wedding dress is not only worn by the bride but also by women recently married into the *mahalla*, who sit – and at times also stand – against the wall of the house in a row. This emphasizes their position in the patrilineally related *mahalla* as a *nuse* – that is, a bride or a recently in-married woman. Presented as a collective, they seem to represent the ‘latest achievements’ or the ‘common treasure’ of the groom’s patrilineage



**Figure 6.7.** In-married women of the *farefis* in wedding dresses lining up against the wall of the groom's house during a wedding (© Carolin Leutloff-Grandits)

(*farefis*). Like the traditional attire, the white bridal dress and style of the young women who recently married into the kinship group highlight the patrilineal kinship collective, their individual beauty, and the social status of the families into which these women are married.

Importantly, this collective of the *nuse* also includes migrant women whose spouses are from the groom's *mahalla*. Seated next to each other, the young, recently married women follow a uniform code of conduct that characterizes their gender positioning as well as their position within the family and kin group. With heads humbly bowed, they refrain from chatting or bursting into laughter and wait until other female wedding guests arrive to greet them with their *temena*, a graceful and highly ritualized hand gesture that silently expresses respect for tradition, family and kinship group while also demonstrating the individuality and personality of the young married women. Girls in Opoja learn this special bridal greeting, directed to the women of the groom's kinship group, at an early age (Reineck 1991). Indeed, at weddings, the arriving female guests 'take the hands' (*me marrë dorën*) of the lined-up women in wedding dresses to be greeted by them individually. They then discuss the different bridal and other outfits and either admire or criticize a woman's appearance – for example, as elegant and modern or too urban or not respectful enough towards the groom's family – setting boundaries and assigning her a status within the translocal community.

In contrast to the younger married women, the middle-aged and older women obtain their status through their daughter(s)-in-law rather than their own outfits. They mostly wear a simple white blouse and a black skirt, or a

relatively simple *dimia* with a blouse, sometimes with a headscarf. On the other hand, unmarried young girls wear tight jeans and shirts, or short skirts or dresses, like the teens in Western European countries. Compared to married women, they are not required to invest much in their attire, and they do not have complicated hairstyles and wear little to no make-up. Still, fashion and physical appearance among local youth signal their social status and attractiveness and represent an expression of the lifestyles they aspire to (see also Chapter 1).

Unlike married women, men do not adhere to a strict dress code during the wedding festivities, and, as several men jokingly told me, they often serve as ‘chauffeurs’ for the women of the household. On the wedding, they wake up early to drive them to the hair salons, sometimes as far as Prizren, 45-minutes away, and then later in the morning to the wedding festivities at the groom’s house. In the afternoon, they transport the women from the wedding to the bride’s village, where the bride is picked up to be taken to the wedding festivities in the groom’s courtyard, and in the evening, they drop them off at home. In this way, however, they actively preserve the ‘traditional’ gender and family roles within the patrilocal kinship system.

### CONVEYING THE BRIDE TO THE GROOM’S HOUSE AND AFFIRMING ‘PATRILOCAL’ KINSHIP AND GENDER ROLES

The ritual of picking up the bride from her parents’ home and bringing her to the groom’s house represents the climax of the wedding festivities. Customarily, more than 100 people connected to the groom’s family travel by car to the bride’s family’s home to escort her to the groom’s house. Men who own cars offer to fill them with women and children eager to participate in this cavalcade. Others, often the middle-aged and older people, wait for the bride to arrive in the courtyard of the groom’s house. In accordance with the tradition of village exogamy – that is, of marrying outside the village community, which historically also served the purpose of expanding or consolidating the network of acquaintances beyond one’s own village through affinal kinship ties (*miqësi*) (Reineck 1991: 69) – the bride usually comes from another village in the region.

Upon arriving at the bride’s house, men and women again split into two groups. While men wait in their cars or in a neighbouring yard, the women are welcomed by the female members of the bride’s family and the respective *mahalla* in the bride’s yard. For this welcome ritual, the women of the bride’s family serve as the masters of ceremony, and together with the newly in-married brides of their patrilineal kin group, they greet the female guests of the groom’s family. Two lines are formed: one comprising women from

the bride's family and the *mahalla* to welcome the arriving guests, and the other comprising the guests. The older women of the bride's family offer drinks and some perfume to the guests as a welcome gesture, and in the line formed they are followed by newly married women from the bride's *mahalla*, wearing their white wedding dresses and greeting the guests with a *temena*. Recently married brides from the *mahalla* stand closer to the bride, who stands at the end of the line. The bride wears her luxurious white wedding dress and a red scarf covering her head, which symbolizes her virginity and protection against evil eyes (*syni i keq*). Young women who I had first met as giggling teenagers, sporting tight jeans or miniskirts, had been transformed into 'fairy-tale' brides, expressing elegance and grace. Among these brides are migrant women, who normally live abroad; the ones I met claimed they once knew nothing about the wedding rituals and were critical of the whole ritualized process. At their weddings in Opoja, they metamorphosed into 'proper brides' and blended into the local community – even though some reported the stress of performing the traditional role or refused to perform certain aspects.

During the ritual of taking the bride, the bride traditionally keeps her eyes firmly fixed on the ground as a sign of respect towards the groom's family and as an expression of her sadness at leaving her own family. She is then approached by the mother-in-law, or the eldest sister-in-law, who lifts the scarf for the first time and affixes a piece of jewellery on her. Other close relatives follow to affix money to the bride's hair. Customs are, however, changing as not all brides adhere to the traditions any more. Some do not look down but join others in observing the scene during this ritual. Contrary to the traditions, some even start to smile, but this is liable to be criticized by elderly women as inappropriate behaviour. All in all, however, the festivities in the bride's courtyard represent a highly ritualized ceremony, at the end of which the bride is bid farewell by her relatives – a moment that is even more emotional if she is to travel abroad to join her spouse. With her face again covered, she is brought to the car by her mother-in-law and sisters-in-law to be taken to the groom's family home. In our conversations, some villagers half-jokingly explained that the bride's veil and downcast eyes, especially on the way to the groom's house, historically served the purpose to make it difficult for the bride to memorize the way in case she wanted to 'run home'. It was assumed that brides had suffered in the past from separation from her family and from the servant role she had to take on in the household of her in-laws due to patriarchal customs (Reineck 1991: 68). My interlocutors emphasized that the ritual is still followed but with no practical meaning any more, as circumstances obviously have changed.

The cavalcade of the groom's family and their guests – with the bridal car at the very end – proceeding towards the groom's home is eagerly awaited

by the family and kin members of the groom who stayed behind. The musicians, who create a jubilant atmosphere with their music performance, signal the climax with rhythmic beats, occasionally accelerating their rhythms to intensify the ambience of mirth and cheerfulness when the bridal car approaches the groom's house. The groom's family and guests scream and sing, and girls wave red plastic roses. When the bride finally exits the car, the groom welcomes her by lifting the face covering. Later, the groom and bride open the highly ritualized circle dance with slow, majestic moves. The circle dance is headed by the groom and by various male family members in rotation, but sometimes also by the groom's mother, and they are joined by other guests. This symbolizes the festive welcome of a new member of the family as well as the union of all members of the groom's (patrilineal) family and kin group.

Once the dancing stops, most guests bid farewell, and the groom spends time with his male relatives, while the female members of the family take the bride into the living room of the groom's house and later to the couple's new bedroom, where she can rest until the groom returns. His return to his parents' house late in the evening, accompanied by other male relatives as well as the *magjup* musicians, is another highlight of the wedding festivities. According to local customs, this is also the time when the imam arrives to perform the Islamic wedding ritual in the presence of the groom, his parents and two witnesses, for which neither the bride nor the bridal party is required. Thus, the Islamic ritual strengthens the patriarchal position of men and the groom's family. However, the imam is absent from some marriage ceremonies, which reflects the rather marginal role of Islam within weddings in Opoja, which are usually agreed upon between the families of the bride and groom.

Several – non-religious – wedding rituals further define the spouses' gender-specific roles in the marriage and within the patrilocal kin group. For example, on the morning following the wedding night, the groom and his bride participate in various games in the circle of relatives and guests, such as the bread-breaking game, in which both spouses grab a freshly baked bread at opposite ends to break it, and the one who gets the bigger piece wins. At the one I was present, the atmosphere was not very conducive to the young bride. During the game, the groom's relatives and the youth from his *mahalla* shouted out the name of their village, as if the groom's victory would symbolize the victory of his entire village. It goes without saying that the respectful bride let her groom win. As for the songs sung by the girls of the *mahalla* during the wedding, these and other rituals are generally considered fun, as relics of old times, not meant to offend or to be taken seriously. Still, these rituals support the re-traditionalization of gender, family and kinship roles, emphasizing patrilinearity, patrilocality and the subordination of the



bride under the authority of the groom and the in-laws, at least symbolically. However, such rituals are countered by those others that emphasize the romantic and caring relationship between the newlyweds; for example, when the groom and bride feed each other blindfolded.

## RISING WEDDING COSTS AND THE PRESSURE TO MIGRATE

Invoking Bourdieu, Julia Pauli (2011: 154) has highlighted that weddings in Namibia 'changed into celebrations of class distinctions', starting in the 1970s, to the extent that 'in no other area of life has the emerging elite of politicians and professionals invested as much money and creativity to exhibit and celebrate their distinctiveness as they do in weddings'. Taking up the argument that 'houses are the elephants of stuff' (Miller 2010: 81), Julia Pauli (2011: 164) rightly suggests that 'weddings may be rhinos'. In Kosovo, weddings have transformed over time, and wedding costs are a sensitive issue. As Janet Reineck (1991: 86–87) reports, wedding costs, including bridal gifts, had already skyrocketed in Opoja by the 1980s. She links this to villagers being abroad as labour migrants and sending foreign currency to the village. As this development put many families under severe pressure, there were attempts to limit the costs of bridal gifts – however, unsuccessfully. Villagers also told me that another source of the high costs for the groom's family was that the entire village was invited to the festive lunch. As guests are not expected to bring gifts, the lavish wedding festivities could also be interpreted as a potlatch (Wolf 1999: 84), which 'destroyed' the finances of the groom's family, forcing them to go into debt merely to marry off their son and gain status in the community. In the 1990s, villagers went so far as to cut down the guest list and invited only the families of their own patrilineally related *mahalla* within the village along with the affinal relatives from outside the village. By reducing the guest list to include mainly those in the *mahalla*, they also emphasized the significance of patrilineality and partilocality.

In the 1990s, weddings were also celebrated in a low-key manner due to the intensifying political conflict along ethnonational lines, whereby the Serbian-dominated government took suppressive measures against the Albanian population. At that time, many families in Opoja celebrated without the music of the *magjup* bands, who were believed to be collaborating with the Serbs. One villager reported a case in which the marriage was conducted without the associated celebrations, as all the villagers from Opoja had to flee to Albania due to the advancing Serbian army, and the groom decided to flee together with his bride – from then on they were considered married.

Social life started to flourish again after the NATO intervention in 1999 put an end to the Serbian-dominated regime in Kosovo and the year-long

suppression of Albanians in Kosovo, which enabled the villagers to return to their homes. With that, weddings regained their significance and were celebrated lavishly notwithstanding the rising costs, which soon spiked to over 10,000 euros, about three to four times higher than the typical costs listed by Janet Reineck (1991) for the late 1980s (\$800 for the bridal gifts and \$2,000 for the wedding itself).

However, the more recent rise in wedding costs is strongly linked to migrants' aspiration to gain social status in Opoja and within the translocal kin group while living with their families more or less permanently abroad. The high spending is expected to showcase the migrant's success and modern lifestyle without relinquishing the 'traditional' rituals and family values that connect them to their local community and their sons to the patrilocal kin group. Most parents – abroad but also in the village – are determined to hold a 'proper' wedding for their son(s), even if that entails hardships. Veton, for example, who had emigrated to Germany in the early 1990s and brought his sons over after the war, financed the wedding of his first son to a young woman from a neighbouring village who had moved to Austria with her family when the war broke out. Since the wedding took place in Opoja, Veton was able to invite his large circle of relatives there and spent a total of about 25,000 euros, including the costs of additional wedding festivities at a restaurant, described in the next section. As his regular earnings could not cover the wedding costs, Veton took on an additional part-time job in the evenings and weekends, and his wife and sons worked with him (see also Chapter 3).

While wedding investments are seen to contribute to the reconstitution of the family, the kin group and the community, they may also trigger a form of 'wedding competition' in the community. As social differences have increased since the war, less affluent families – particularly those who cannot rely on migrants for financial assistance – feel pressured by the high wedding standards set by migrant families in Opoja. In order to sustain the homogeneity of the marriage customs in Opoja, various families, even those with migrants, borrow money from the bank and mortgage their homes (Krasniqi 2016: 200) despite the high interest rates on loans. This is a dangerous undertaking that may lead to precarious situations within families. It also deepens the new social divide within the translocal village community.

Moreover, costly weddings affect the prospects of many families in Opoja and their individual members, since money is no longer available to fulfil other goals – thus limiting possible futures. Saimir, who is in his mid-fifties, lives in Opoja and has organized three weddings for his three sons, each of which cost about 10,000 to 15,000 euros. The high wedding costs meant Samir and his wife had to postpone their plans to build new houses that would enable the division of the large household, so they remained sharing a household with their married sons, daughters-in-law and grand-

children. In order to reduce wedding costs, various families in Opoja may host celebrations for two sons simultaneously, possibly forcing those wanting to marry earlier to wait until the time when another sibling is ready.

Most importantly, however, several young men I met felt pressured to migrate abroad to earn the money needed for their wedding and/or the wedding of their brothers, as their fathers were unable to afford the wedding expenses. While this was already the case in the 1980s (Reineck 1991: 90), by 2010, the need to migrate and earn money abroad was likely even more pressing (see Chapter 2). Such a need can also thwart individual plans to achieve higher education. One example is Lirim, who went to Austria on a student visa to complete his master's degree. Instead of postponing his wedding to finish his studies first or having a small wedding, he bowed to his parents' wishes and demands to get married according to their plans for him, which meant earning money instead of focusing on his studies. Lirim agreed, not only out of respect for his parents but also because, as he explained to me, he saw his marriage as an investment in his own future, since it would give him stability, and he would achieve the important goal of starting his own family. In this way, he was able to come to terms more quickly with the idea of postponing his studies.

Others may be critical of the wedding costs, the long guest list or the customs and rituals but to no effect, since the influence of parents and the wider translocal community and the norms set by them are paramount. Osman, a young man from Ojoja studying in Germany who was engaged to a woman from his region, said he was not willing to spend so much money on the wedding. He argued that this would mean he would have to work to pay for the wedding and that he would have limited time to study, which would jeopardize his university plans and any related dreams for the future. Without achieving his study goal, he would also lose his residence permit sooner or later, which in turn meant that he would have to return to Opoja, where there were no job prospects. His parents, however, did not agree with him about keeping the wedding celebrations small, as this would have a negative impact on their status at home. As a result, Osman bowed to his family's expectations on the size of the wedding festivities and bridal gifts and shifted his focus to organizing the financing.

Members of the groom's family, regardless of whether the groom and the groom's parents live in Opoja or abroad, thus, view the wedding as a collective family enterprise. It is a means of expanding and uniting the family, even if this entails restricting the plans and ambitions of individual family members. Sometimes, this leads to conflict between family members, especially between parents and their sons, but sons often give in to these norms and adjust their individual goals. Usually male family members (sometimes undocumented) are sent away simply to finance the wedding costs. As newly

married men may go abroad again after the wedding to continue earning money, this can lead to a longer separation of newly married couples.

Since a large portion of the total wedding costs is devoted to the needs of the female family members, especially the bridal gifts, it can be assumed that women are the driving force behind the high wedding costs. Janet Reineck (1991: 88) has already pointed out that in the late 1980s, women insisted on sizeable wedding gifts as a significant sign of their honour, prestige and social status. Moreover, marriage was for many the only opportunity to acquire personal items, since most women did not engage in wage labour or at least stopped doing so after marriage. While this was largely true during the period of my fieldwork as well, this was not the case for all women. Several educated women, especially migrant women residing in EU countries who were also often employed, stated quite openly that they did not like the expensive gifts and dresses that were customary in Opoja but that their attitude met with disapproval from the groom's parents, and especially the groom's mother, who has the final say in these matters. Edona, who married in Opoja despite having lived abroad for many years, rejected the purchase of lavish gold jewellery but relented when her mother-in-law insisted on gold for the wedding as being customary in Opoja.

Many young migrant women differentiate between the village and the migration context, adapting their respective tastes and styles to places and environments. One of these women for example explained that she used most of the dresses she had received in her bridal trousseau only at weddings in Opoja and not abroad but that she sees that as part of the local culture and tradition to be respected. The fact that women are the centre of attention at weddings in the Opoja region and are paramount in making it an unforgettable experience for the community may have contributed to their positive attitude with respect to high wedding costs and the investment in traditions.

### WEDDING SALONS AS A SIGNAL OF TRANSLOCAL SOCIAL DISTINCTION

In the post-war period, especially since the early 2000s, celebrating weddings in a wedding salon (*salloni i dasmave*) is considered fashionable in Kosovo. Such salons, located on the outskirts of a town and accommodating between 300 to 1,000 guests, are relatively new constructions often resembling columned palaces covered with mirrors. The boom in the construction of such wedding salons was palpable, and in urban areas, most weddings now no longer take place at home but more or less exclusively in such salons and last only one day. This phenomenon is not unique to Kosovo; it is prevalent in other post-Yugoslav post-war societies. As Hannes Grandits (2007) and



**Figure 6.8.** A modern wedding salon on the outskirts of a town in Kosovo  
(© Carolin Leutloff-Grandits)

Robert Pichler (2009b) show, large wedding salons accommodating hundreds of guests, now widely used in post-Dayton Bosnia-Herzegovina and by Albanian migrants in Northern Macedonia, respectively, emphasize the increased significance of personal connections in post-socialist and post-war neoliberal times.

As observed by Julia Pauli (2013) for Namibia, weddings are increasingly an arena for emphasizing social distinction because of the extraordinarily high costs of such celebrations relative to the income of many families, and an increasing number of people cannot afford to marry any more. In Kosovo today, marriages are still the norm, in the sense that the number of people who remain unmarried throughout their life is very low. But as marriages increasingly take place in restaurants or wedding salons in the presence of several hundred guests, including relatives, with an emphasis on consumption, they have also become an arena for social distinction.<sup>2</sup>

In the early 2000s, many such wedding salons cropped up in the town of Prizren, approximately a 45 minute drive away, which Opoja villagers have increasingly come to use. More recently, some locals have also invested in wedding salon constructions on the outskirts of the villages. These salons offer not only proximity but also more favourable prices, starting at 15 euros per invited person. In one Opoja village in 2013, seventy weddings took place at a wedding salon that accommodates 300 people. A more spacious wedding salon opened in 2012 in Dragash, the municipal centre of Opoja.

Nevertheless, during my field research, it was not common for weddings in the Opoja region to be celebrated only at a restaurant. The bride was

brought from her parental house to the groom's house, following the rituals described above, such as the display of gifts at the groom's and the bride's house, before the festivities were moved to the restaurant. However, with the rising popularity of restaurant weddings, the celebrations at the groom's house will likely move entirely to the restaurant rather than merely complementing the celebrations at the groom's house. This is already an established practice in other regions. Given the ongoing outmigration of families and the neoliberal changes that are also leading to greater individualization, restaurant weddings also have the advantage of relying less on kinship and community support. In addition, restaurant weddings are also changing gender and kinship relationships. In fact, restaurant celebrations differ significantly from wedding festivities 'at home'. First, in restaurant weddings there is a greater focus on food (especially meat) and catering, which increases the costs. Waiters must be paid, while at home weddings members of the family and the *mahalla* engage in the organization of the wedding on a voluntary basis. This suggests that restaurant weddings do not have the same significance as a family or *mahalla* affair, a topic that is sometimes hotly debated among villagers. Another issue is the guest list. Unlike weddings at home, where invitation cards are addressed to the entire household, sometimes only two representatives per household are invited to a restaurant wedding – especially if they are not close relatives. Many still want to invite all relatives and are therefore in favour of a large wedding in a restaurant.

Some young people, however, prefer a reduced guest list and seek to invite only those relatives with whom they have a significant connection – in addition to important friends. In this way they are actively positioning themselves against 'traditional weddings' celebrated in the wider circle of (mainly) patrilineal kin members. These smaller wedding ideals in part resemble the ideal wedding celebration in socialist Albania, which, according to Gerda Dalipaj (2013: 32), should be 'small, inexpensive and not like weddings in "patriarchal" families'. The guest list of the ideal 'socialist wedding' was not limited to the couple's relatives but also includes friends from the workplace. The socialist wedding also meant that '[t]he socialist bride goes immediately to work after the wedding, unlike before, when she had to stay enclosed in her husband's house for a long time' (ibid.: 323). In Opoja, many young women dream of a honeymoon after their wedding, hoping to break away from the traditional and still widespread practice of brides staying with their in-laws after the wedding and receiving family guests in their bridal attire in the afternoon. However, there has been no linear development towards this kind of modernization.

Restaurant weddings, which have become increasingly common in Kosovo since the turn of the millennium, have also led to further changes

in how the wedding is celebrated. At home weddings, the families of the bride and groom celebrate separately, except for the brief period when the bride is picked up from her parents' home. In contrast, at restaurant weddings, the groom's family also invites the bride's close family and relatives. This indicates a shift in the meaning of kinship and valorizes the bride's relatives. In addition to the bride's relatives, good friends and work colleagues are increasingly being invited, which shows the growing importance of work and friend circles. These changes are especially noticeable at weddings in the city, where the bride and groom have a similar number of guests and sometimes also share the costs.

In Opoja, such weddings are still the exception to the rule. At the restaurant celebrations of families in and from Opoja, only a few tables are reserved for the bride's family, and usually the bride's relatives are the first to leave the restaurant. Nevertheless, the importance of the male kinship group in restaurant celebrations has decreased. While agnatic relatives are indispensable in domestic celebrations, readily providing space and support free of charge, a restaurant wedding is largely devoid of overt family or community support, especially with organizational tasks, as the groom's family pays for these as part of the restaurant package.

Many middle-aged and older people still prefer to celebrate their wedding at home, as they consider the presence of guests a special honour for 'the house' (*shtëpia*) and, consequently, for the family and family hospitality. This was also the case among the older generation in Northeastern Turkey in the 1990s (Bellér-Hann and Hann 2001: 148). On the other hand, young people often emphasize that a home wedding is a significant burden on the inviting family, leaving all members completely exhausted at the end, while restaurant celebrations are more fun, not least because the inviting family is finally able to enjoy the celebration. However, since most restaurant celebrations in the Opoja region are still preceded by lengthy preparations and celebrations at home, family members continue to be overwhelmed and exhausted when they finally arrive at the restaurant.

Restaurant weddings, furthermore, undermine the notion of the wedding as a family and kin affair, as attention shifts to the bridal couple, who take centre stage at the banquet. To celebrate their union as an expression of a love relation, the couple and the inviting family introduced various new rituals, which often take on a 'Western' appearance, resembling Hollywood depictions of weddings. It has become customary for the couple to cut the obligatory five-tiered sugar cream wedding cake together. In one case, the couple marched into a romantic fire installation, where a burning heart lay on the floor. Other new rituals to celebrate the romantic union of the bridal couple include the dance of the groom and bride, often accompanied by applauding guests. That is also the moment when the dance may shift from the



**Figure 6.9.** The seats for the bride and groom in a wedding salon (© Carolin Leutloff-Grandits)

traditional circle dance (*valle*) to a couple dance, which is popular not only among the younger generation but also among the middle-aged. The different dance style corresponds to the changed music style at most restaurant weddings. Instead of the drumbeat of the *magjup* band, Albanian folk music or even globalized disco music is played by the DJs, who are hired by the inviting family. Last but not least, alcohol, especially beer, *raki* (Schnapps) and wine, is served in many restaurant weddings. Although primarily consumed by men, the rising level of alcohol consumption during the restaurant wedding creates an increasingly easy-going atmosphere that is especially appreciated by the young generation. Nevertheless, alcohol consumption also poses a problem, as numerous men are often not used to drinking regularly and may drive their families home drunk after the wedding.

Generally, gender divisions at restaurant weddings are not as clear-cut as at weddings held in the yard of the groom's family, where women usually remain in female company. At restaurant weddings, where couples are seated next to each other, it can suddenly become a problem when women come without their husbands. Dafina, for example, explained to me that she felt uneasy when she had to go alone to the restaurant wedding of a relative because her spouse had to work abroad. She added that a wedding without a man is nothing for a woman –something that would not even be considered at a wedding that takes place in a family's yard, where there is little interaction between men and women. However, it also emphasizes the increasing importance of couple relationships in rural Kosovo.



## CONCLUSION

Owing to the strong involvement of migrants residing in EU countries, wedding festivities in the Opoja region have a kinship- and community-building effect across national borders. Lavishly celebrated wedding festivities in Opoja lead to a convergence of translocal family networks, which can counteract the possible fragmentation of the family and the kin group as a result of the continuing outmigration of villagers and the increased levels of globalization in Kosovo. Wedding celebrations bring together the diverse experiences and perspectives of villagers and migrants to unite in a vision for a shared future. They are therefore an important foundation for the translocal building of kinship care relationships.

Weddings in Opoja are highly ritualized, and both villagers and migrants invest in weddings that they perceive primarily as family and kinship celebrations, sparing no expense. 'Tradition' merges with 'modernity', as such festivities blend local customs with new cosmopolitan fashions. By celebrating in and with reference to Opoja, the translocal family and kinship network is enforced. This can also be seen as a response to the socio-economic challenges in neoliberal times – in Opoja and in various places of migration. Within the wedding rituals, villagers and migrants actively cherish, respect, professionalize and even reinvent the 'traditional' wedding customs that stress the unity of the agnatic kin group, which still finds its spatial expression in the local *mahalla*. Among translocal kinship networks, which have their centre in Opoja, weddings are hosted by the groom's family and often celebrated in a domestic environment, within the yard of the groom's house, but increasingly also at a wedding salon within the region.

The wedding celebrations underscore the importance of patrilocality, the male descent line and the unity of the translocal kin group, in which 'traditional' gender and generational roles are clearly marked and expressed in spatial and visual arrangements. The wedding celebrations thus give patrilocality and gender relations a special meaning. The new elements that villagers and migrants add to the wedding preparation include the complex embroidered patterns for the blouses and hair decoration made by hand by village women and mainly bought by migrants. Gifted to complement the 'traditional' wedding costumes and exhibited during the *kënjegji* as well as in the groom's yard, these embellishments imbue the more predictable or 'traditional' aspects of the wedding with new life. Home weddings are largely organized by the family and the *mahalla*, and migrants appreciate the 'authenticity' of these rituals and performances as an expression of their identity, their 'roots' and their belonging in the local community, in which they financially invest. Often migrants celebrate fervently, spending large

sums of money on the celebrations while enjoying bringing family and relatives together and being part of the village community.

Simultaneously, villagers as well as migrants readily link up to the globalized culture and integrate 'modern' and 'Western' wedding styles into translocal festivities. Inspired by media, they invest in new styles of attire and makeup and introduce new rituals and elements that seek to highlight the bridal couple and their romantic relations. This also leaves space to carve out alternative gender and social relations, often transforming the gendered hierarchy. Weddings held at restaurants, where the hold of the patrilineal tradition and kin group loosens, divert the focus to the future of the bride and groom.

Migrants often dominate the village landscape during their summer visits, not least because they often willingly invest in such weddings. In doing so, they claim their membership and status in the community. But more generally, the lavishly celebrated weddings create a strong sense of family and community, symbolizing stability, security and continuity that ongoing outmigration and severe economic insecurities tend to undermine. As such, weddings amount to a foundational expression of care for the couple, their families and the larger community.

However, such investments in a wedding can divide the community along the predictable fault lines of migration – for those who can afford costly celebrations are usually migrants. The inviting family, which is expected to cover the costs, are pressured into living up to the standard set by migrants, which has led to rising wedding costs. Family members are sometimes forced to migrate to seek work to cover the wedding expenses, often at the expense of pursuing their education. Weddings are, thus, ambivalent investments in the family, kin group and community that can represent or change the social status of individual members and their prospects.

Generational relations are also influential here. The younger generation frequently (still) subordinates their own ideals to parental expectations of lavish weddings, even though this may impact the realization of their plans for the future. But not all families subscribe to this 'wedding competition'. With growing socio-economic differences, the decline of agriculture that localizes the village community, and diminishing respect for the older generation in post-war Kosovo, marriage practices have diversified, and young people may opt for alternative marriage practices. While in the past elopements were sometimes practised when parents were against the spousal choice, there are nowadays individual cases in which the young woman moves into the house of the young man and is thus considered married. In some cases, that may be followed by a smaller wedding celebration involving the immediate families (for Turkey, see Hart 2010).

In line with the findings of Micaela Di Leonardo (1987), who emphasizes the dialectic of competition and cooperation, self-interest and altruism in kinship work, weddings in Opoja are characterized by both competition and cooperation between families and individuals, as well as by the simultaneous investment in tradition and modernity. Weddings in Opoja show how interconnected the spheres of self-interest and kinship care are and the extent to which Opoja emerges as a prominent translocal region that is closely related to migration contexts. In these wedding festivities, notions of patrilocality and patrilineality are given particular importance, even if emancipated gender relations and romance are gaining ground.

#### NOTES

1. Interestingly, the social anthropologist Janet Reineck (1991) learned the dance and also performed it at weddings in the late 1980s. In her role as a 'respected foreign researcher', she was situationally incorporated into the men's group.
2. Recently, some bridal families have also started to celebrate the *kënjegji* at a restaurant. In some regions of Kosovo, like in Isniq and Gjakova, this is done in the morning of the wedding, so that the bride is no longer picked up from her home but from the restaurant celebrations with her kin before the groom's family then celebrates the wedding in a different restaurant. Families have also started to celebrate circumcision ceremonies in restaurants.