

# “By the elders’ leave, I do”

## Rituals, ostensivity and perceptions of the moral order in Iranian Tehrani marriage ceremonies

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The basis of this study is the view that social ritual practices embody and reinforce the moral order of communities. It takes a step towards providing more empirical research on the ritual practices in lesser studied languages by examining ethnographic data collected during marriage ceremonies in Tehran. Extracts taken from marriage ceremonies and a film extract are examined in terms of *recurrence*, *liminality*, *embodiment of the moral order* and *emotivity*, elements identified in Kádár’s definition of ritual (2017). The paper makes a theoretical contribution by showing that *ostensivity* can also be considered an important facet of ritual. In ritual practices connected with marriage, ostensivity is experienced by participants and observers as a means of maintaining the moral order. The paper proposes future areas of research for the theoretical refinement of the concept of ostensivity and further examination of the relationship that ostensivity has with *ta’arof* (Iranian ritual politeness) and face.

**Keywords:** ritual, ostensivity, Iranian marriage ceremonies, wedding ceremonies, Iranian ritual politeness (*ta’arof*), face

### 1. Introduction

#### 1.1 Brief overview

This study is in direct response to Kádár’s call for research on ritual in lesser studied languages (2017, 225), and takes a step towards providing more empirical research on Iranian ritual practices in Persian. Based on data from participant observation and post-event and ethnographic interviews, it makes a theoretical contribution to Kádár’s ritual schema, by identifying ostensivity and examining its links with the other elements in the schema.

To my knowledge, Iranian urban marriage ceremonies have not yet been analysed in detail from either a pragmatic or a ritual theory perspective nor linked to a sense of moral order, and therefore, this research makes a contribution to the field of Iranian pragmatics. In the collective society of Iran, particularly Tehran, variations are observable in traditional marriage practices: traditional marriage rituals retain their external forms, even though their substance may have changed. The analysis indicates that the retention of external forms is closely linked to perceptions of moral order.

## 1.2 Previous research

Ritual was initially the object of study for sociologists. Durkheim's (1912) seminal work argued that ritual plays an important role in the formation of social networks by signalling the interdependence among group members. It has also been extensively studied in anthropology, with Malinowski examining phatic communion and how words create "ties of union" (1923, 315); Goffman (1967, 1972) focusing on everyday interaction rituals; and Turner (1969) identifying separation, liminality and incorporation in the rites of passage.

Pragmatic studies in various cultures have extensively examined interpersonal communication patterns, particularly politeness, which contains ritualistic elements (Matsumoto 1988, 1989; Ide S 1989; Gu 1990; Ide R 1998; Ohashi 2008, 2013, among others). In recent years ritual has gained focus in its own right in pragmatics, where it is charting new interdisciplinary territory through the exploration of its relationship with communication and interpersonal interaction (Senft and Basso 2009; Kádár 2013), (im)politeness (Kádár and Haugh 2013, 148ff; Kádár 2017), and other subfields.

To set the scene for Iranian ritual, a brief note follows. Iranian ritual politeness (*ta'arof*) was treated descriptively in earlier studies (Hodge 1957; Assadi 1980) while Beeman defines *ta'arof*, as "the active, ritualised realisation of differential perceptions of superiority and inferiority in interaction" (1986, 56–57) and examines its connections with power and status. Asdjoodi (2001) compares ritual politeness to the Chinese *limao*, and Bucar (2012) examines its potential pitfalls in communication.

Koutlaki's study of Iranian ritual politeness (*ta'arof*) and face (1997, 2002, 2009) traces a direct line from Malinowski's phatic communion through Goffman's interaction rituals and the concept of face (1959, 1967, 1972). Koutlaki details how the three principles of Persian politeness (deference, humility and cordiality) are realised through specific ritual politeness (*ta'arof*) strategies that are closely linked to face considerations (1997, 2009), by pointing out that 'going through the motions' in ostensible offers, invitations and refusals, which are manifestations of

ritual politeness (*ta'arof*), gives rise to politeness assessments and face enhancement. In this study, situated within the recent focus on ritual in pragmatics, I adopt Kádár's definition (2017, 12):

[R]itual is a formalized and recurrent action, which is relationship forcing; that is, by operating, it reinforces/transforms interpersonal relationships. Ritual is realized as an embedded liminal (mini)performance [which is] bound to relational history (and related moral order), or historicity in general (and related moral order). Ritual is an emotively invested action, as anthropological research has shown.

In the above definition, Kádár identifies the elements of *recurrence*, *liminality*, *embodiment of the moral order* and *emotivity* (2013, 2017). I understand **recurrence** to be the repetition of set patterns, whether they are initiation/response pairs, longer exchange sequences or whole speech events. Kádár (2013, 183), following Taylor (1994), argues that recurrence is distinguishable from discursive repetition; however, in this study, the term 'recurrence' includes 'discursive repetition.'

Kádár's definition characterises rituals as "models of moral order" (following Whithnow 1989, 58), and defines **moral order** as "the perceived aggregated obligations and affordances of individuals within a community, and communities within a society, which manifest themselves in norms and rules by means of which we keep things in their place," (2017, xvii) "occasionally even without explicitly recognizing the values that we re-enact through maintaining this order" (2017, 2). In other words, ritual functions are the symbolic embodiment of the moral order and, as such, can have an emotive effect on the performer (Kádár 2013, 113), and produce feelings of solidarity and attachment with the participant group (Collins 2004, 108).

**Liminality** is understood to be the crossing of the border between the 'ordinary' and the 'extraordinary' and describes ritual as a "relational target-oriented action, which sticks out from what is regarded as 'ordinary flow' of interaction as 'salient' from the participants' point of view" (Kádár 2017, 6–7). **Emotivity** is the aspect of ritual that refers to the interdependency of (im)politeness and feelings (Locher and Langlotz 2008; also see Kádár's detailed discussion (2013, 111–115)).

### 1.3 Iranian marriage rituals

Beeman (1986, 47) writes that "families marry families...marriage negotiations can approach the complexity of a corporate merger" which apparently refers to the number of 'events', each with its own name, that take place in every marriage, from the first contact until well after the wedding ceremony. Marriage ceremonies

provide a key dataset for the examination of ritual, as these are occasions in which two families gradually become acquainted. In these interactional settings, conformity to the moral order and an awareness of how this conformity is linked to face<sup>1</sup> are particularly important.

The following overview is compiled from the accounts of native informants and my own first-hand experience of Iranian life (see Figure 1). During the fifteen years of my life in Iran, I conducted conversations and informal interviews with my extended circle of family, friends, colleagues and students. This caveat should however be noted: to many Iranians, the conventions that I describe might sound like stories from their parents' youth, removed from their own experience. However, my own personal and professional experience among traditional, religious milieus indicates that these practices are still prevalent; traditional families are expected to conform to these practices, even if the young couple do things differently, as shown in the first extract below.

Traditionally, the groom's mother identifies a prospective bride and arranges a visit with the groom and his father. The prospective couple speak in private, usually over several sessions. When an agreement in principle is reached, an official meeting of 'exchange of promise to marry' (*baleh-boroon*) takes place. Historically, the *baleh-boroon* was an occasion attended by close relatives, in which the families became acquainted and discussed the particulars of the match (bridal gift, the couple's accommodation, wedding reception details). The male elders of both families played an active role in the process, the content and the outcome of the negotiations, as I observed during a *baleh-boroon* in 1999. Discussions can become animated because the bride's family might demand a bridal gift of a large number of gold coins, often regarded as a matter of prestige. However, the groom's family generally argue in favour of a more modest amount, as the groom is legally bound to pay the bridal gift upon demand.<sup>2</sup> In a situation where the two families have only known each other for a short time, the face stakes are high: respect for the views of elders, the reputation and social standing of both families, and practical and legal considerations have to be finely balanced until a final agreement is reached and ratified by the family elders.

Other particulars of a matchmaking deal are common knowledge, so the two families generally have similar expectations. The wedding reception and the couple's accommodation are always the groom's responsibility. The bride's family pro-

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1. An exploration of how Kádár's ritual schema and the element of ostensivity are related to face lies outside the scope of this paper.

2. Article 1083, Civil Law of the Islamic Republic of Iran. <https://rc.majlis.ir/fa/law/show/97937> accessed 27 July 2019

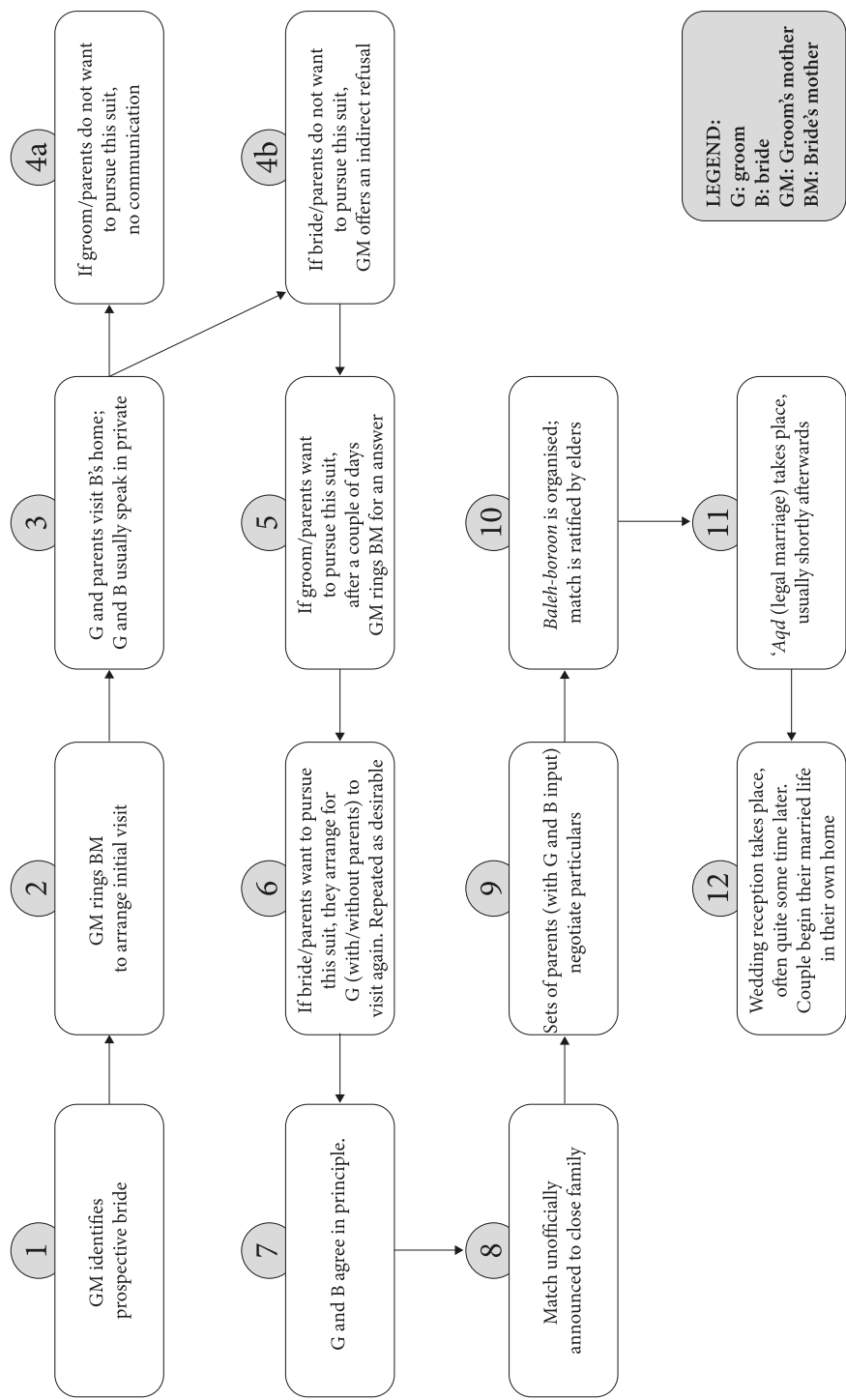


Figure 1. Iranian marriage process

vide the bridal trousseau, including home furniture, furnishings, bed linen and kitchen contents, including electrical appliances.

In post-event ethnographic interviews with participants and observers, informants generally regarded marriage rituals as ‘customs’ and ‘that’s how it is’, which appear to be compelling reasons for conformity. Such views provide an insight into the function of ritual as a phenomenon that facilitates social transaction by indexing the actors’ adherence to the same moral order, even if this adherence is only ostensive, as in Extract 1.

According to my observations of three recent cases of the *baleh-boroon* (2013–2018) over the last decade a significant change has taken place: negotiations on the important issues of the match take place behind closed doors between the two immediate families, while the *baleh-boroon* is now ceremonial in character. This fact was confirmed by a total of 23 informants, some of whom were the central participants in these ceremonies, and others to whom I described the situation and asked for an assessment. This development highlights the strong element of ostensivity which is present in these ceremonies: positive footing is established in the relationship between the two extended families through the ostensible show of respect (e.g. through the use of terms of address and honorifics, the approval expressed through the signing of the booklet) and the ostensible show of adherence to the moral order (such as gender roles and seniority position).

Traditionally the bride was ‘given away’ by her family, left her parents’ home and joined the groom’s family by physically living with them. Contemporary, urban living conditions, such as apartment living, have necessitated a complete change to this tradition. Therefore, young couples move to their own home, but the alteration in status is still felt psychologically and emotionally in similar ways to the past. This understanding is encoded in language, in expressions such as ‘the bride of the family’, or ‘since Mariam entered her husband’s family’. In the situation where a woman has married into a family from which one of her male relatives has taken a wife, the expression ‘we gave one [woman], we took one’ is used. This conceptualisation is clearly evident in the conversations that were conducted with informants, and indexed by the fact that the *baleh-boroon* ceremony is always organised and hosted by the bride’s family.

Only family elders attend *baleh-boroon* ceremonies, where a male elder is in charge of the proceedings. During these ceremonies the bride, groom and female elders do not talk formally to the participants, although their presence is central to the ritual. These are all recurring patterns in which the other elements of ritual are also discernible.

## 2. Objectives of this study

This study has two objectives, one empirical and one theoretical.

### – Empirical objective

The empirical objective is to make an original contribution to Iranian pragmatics and to the field of interpersonal ritual in lesser studied lingua-cultures. By adopting Kádár's view (2013, 2017) that social ritual practices embody and reinforce the moral order of communities, this paper is a response to Kádár's call for more empirical research on the ritual practices of "lesser studied languages, which can reveal *culture-specific* understandings of *how* and *why* interactants should maintain the community's moral order via ritual practices and actions" (Kádár 2017, 225; emphases added). This study moves one step further towards the development of this framework by focusing on the concept of ostensivity (defined below) and sketching its links with moral order on the basis of empirical data.

### – Theoretical objective

The theoretical objective is to show that the concept of *ostensivity* is an important component of ritual along with the elements of ritual, namely, *recurrence*, *liminality*, *embodiment of the moral order* and *emotivity* identified in Kádár's definition of ritual. In fact, Kádár's definition alludes to *ostensivity* ("liminal (mini) performance" 2017, 12) and elsewhere, if not in name, but by mentioning the element of "performance in front of a real or imaginary audience" (Kádár 2017, xvi and 87). Therefore, as a working definition, I suggest that '*ostensivity is the apparent conformity to established customs, the enactment of self's and others' status and the show of respect through social rituals, in the presence of an audience*'. I suggest that ostensivity can be identified in ritual in the same way as the aforementioned four elements; in the analysis I identify these five elements of ritual and provide evidence that ostensivity permeates rituals as a whole.

Ostensivity in Iranian marriage rituals is closely linked to perceptions of moral order and face considerations. In other words, participants' intentions to establish new relationships and to reinforce existing ones are closely linked to the perceived moral order and their own face considerations. These are actualised through ostensivity, i.e., through the actors *being seen* to conform to established patterns of behaviour (Koutlaki 1997, 2009), irrespective of whether heartfelt engagement is present or even assumed.

The link between the concept of ostensivity and *ta'arof* (ritual politeness) lies here, in that "going through the motions" of *ta'arof* (ritual politeness), irrespective of the real intentions, "fulfils the expectations of the social structure that bring the

ritual alive” (Kádár 2017, 8), which in turn enhances the face of the participant by creating a sense that things are as they should be.

The paper seeks to address the following research questions:

- Can the elements identified in Kádár’s ritual schema be applied to Iranian marriage ritual?
- Can Kádár’s ritual schema provide a satisfactory account of Iranian marriage ritual?

### 3. Methodology and data collection

This study is based on ethnographic data collected in Tehran. Four extracts from natural data and an extract from the film *Ketab-e Qanoon (The Law Book, 2009*, directed by Maziar Miri) are examined in terms of Kádár’s 2017 ritual elements schema.

For more than three decades, I have lived among Iranian Shi’a Muslim communities in London and Tehran, firstly as the wife of an Iranian and then as employee of an Iranian company in London, through which I developed a network of friends.<sup>3</sup> During my long-term stays in Tehran (1997–2000 and 2007–2018), I lived in close proximity to my religious, traditional in-laws, taught in higher education and immersed myself in everyday Iranian life. I have had rare access to Iranian social circles not usually accessible to European researchers of Iranian culture, and have made observations on Iranian culture from the unique semi-insider vantage point of a wife, mother, daughter- and sister-in-law, colleague, friend and teacher.

I have attended over 30 various marriage ceremonies and have been intimately involved in the wedding ceremonies of four close relatives, the earliest being in 1999 with the most recent in 2018. The delicacy and confidentiality involved in marriage negotiations, and the strong privacy considerations of a gender-segregated society have ultimately prevented me from making audio or video recordings, except on the rare occasions when such permission was granted. In total, I have audio recorded just over five hours and video recorded approximately 36 minutes of three marriage ceremonies. In addition, a considerable body of data was collected through participant observation, in the form of written field notes made during or shortly after the event, and post-event and semi-structured ethnographic interviews, some of which were audio recorded with the participants’ permission. I compiled a list of prompts that helped to start the conver-

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3. See Koutlaki 1997, 72ff. for more on my status as a semi-insider.



sation and used it to conduct fifteen ethnographic interviews, of which six were recorded. Using the same prompts, I also conducted a 75 minute long group discussion with ten female students from various stages of life (unmarried, newly married, long-term married and with recently married offspring). During the non-recorded interviews, I made a note of any salient points which, together with information obtained from direct observation, were used to inform the following analysis.

The film extract, although a dramatic text, helps to highlight the strong reactions that can follow non-conforming behaviour.

#### 4. Data analysis

Section 4.1 presents a description of Extracts 1 and 2 which are taken from “exchange of promise to marry” (*baleh-boroon*) ceremonies, followed by an analysis (Section 4.1.1.) which identifies the elements of *recurrence*, *liminality*, *emotivity* and the *embodiment of the moral order*, as identified in Kádár’s schema, and also *ostensivity*, which I am suggesting should be added to the schema. All extracts (with the exception of 5) were chosen because I, as a close relative, was able to record the second extract and had access to the post-event views of the participants. Extracts 3 and 4 (Section 4.2), from formal wedding ceremonies (*‘aqd*), were selected because they each feature acceptable (to the participants) deviations from the ‘standard’ pattern. Extract 5 (film) was selected because it depicts more serious deviations, with the characters’ reactions being exploited for comic effect, thus highlighting the general expectations of ostensible conformity to the accepted moral order which were not fulfilled in this extract. Again, Section 4.2.1 identifies the five elements of ritual as detailed above.

##### 4.1 ‘Exchange of promise to marry’ (*baleh-boroon*) ceremonies

The first extract is from a *baleh-boroon* held during spring 2016. It illustrates how contemporary social realities can affect traditions, while at the same time traditional rituals are still respected and practised. I was personally involved in this ceremony as the wife of the groom’s eldest maternal uncle.

This case differed from the traditional matchmaking because the young couple (let us call the groom Ali<sup>4</sup> and the bride Mariam) had met without family mediation. According to the evaluation of the groom’s maternal uncle, this practice is still considered to be reprehensible in religious, conservative families,

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4. All names are pseudonyms.

and therefore this fact was deliberately concealed to maintain face among their extended families.

After this marriage was contracted, Mariam's mother said that it is now common practice for youngsters to meet on their own outside the house (with their parents' permission) before the families themselves meet, and this practice is not frowned upon in the same way as it would have been ten years ago. However, she stressed that in her family this practice is unacceptable and, as far as I am aware, it is also unacceptable in Ali's family.

When the couple disclosed their relationship and intention to marry to their respective families, Mariam's mother acted as the animator of the family voice<sup>5</sup> for whom it was important to establish their position and the family standing at an early stage in the new relationship. As part of this role, she conveyed a message to Ali's mother, via Mariam and Ali, asking her to pay them a formal proposal visit. By taking control of the process, Mariam's mother established the ostensive position of the two parties in a manner which is acceptable in their social milieu: namely, parents initiate and follow through, and elders ratify the match. Ali's family were pleased with this development because it allowed both families to announce the event in an acceptable format. Both families were able to tacitly fit the novel situation into a format that ostensibly conforms to their moral order, thus preserving the face of the individuals and their families.

From that moment on, the process followed the established pattern: Ali's mother rang Mariam's mother to arrange the visit, as if she were making the first approach. The first formal proposal visit was then followed by a couple of further formal visits during which, according to Ali's mother, only the two sets of parents and the young couple agreed on the details of the wedding reception, the couple's accommodation and a bridal gift (*mehriyeh*) of 500 gold Azadi coins.<sup>6</sup> Although the negotiation itself did not formally involve any other relatives, Ali's mother shared the details with her siblings.

Mariam's father told Ali's parents that they do not 'give away' girls on a bridal gift of less than 2,000 coins, and added that if his father became aware that they had agreed on 500 coins, he would be upset and embarrassed in the extended

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5. Kádár 2013 *passim*.

6. The issue of the bridal gift (*mehr* or *mehriyeh*) in Iran is a complex matter. This amount (usually, but not necessarily, recorded in gold Azadi coins) is pledged and recorded on the marriage contract, and it is legally payable to the bride (but not to her family) upon demand. However, in practice, it is not paid provided the couple remains married. Socially, it is a matter of prestige for both the young woman and her family (although opinions on this vary). If a woman decides to legally demand payment of her gift, her husband can face imprisonment if he is unable to do so. In autumn 2018 one Azadi coin was worth about 40 million Iranian rials, or approximately £222. See also footnote 3 above.

family. Ali's mother understood this communication as an ostensive demonstration of Mariam's father's respect and regard for Ali and his family, and as an effort to establish his family's prestige at an early stage in the relationship.

After the private agreement was reached, the remainder of the process followed the traditional pattern. Mariam's family held the *baleh-boroon* ceremony in their house, attended by grandparents, paternal and maternal uncles from both families. This event mainly served a ritualistic function as a means of mutual acquaintance of the two families and of ratification of the young couple's union, highlighting the element of ostensivity that has been present throughout the process.

Extract 1.<sup>7</sup>

Mariam's father opened the meeting and formally welcomed Ali's parents and the rest of the family. The following is a summarised version of his opening talk. Words marked in bold indicate other-raising terms and underlined words indicate self-lowering terms, referred to by the shorthand term 'Persian honorifics' (Jahangiri 1980, 220–234; Beeman 1986, 141–147; Koutlaki 1997, 118ff.).<sup>8</sup>

*Bismillah-e Rahman-e Raheem. Khedmate jenabe aqaye [Family Name], sarkar khanum [Family Name], sarvaran-e gerami, [...] dar in monasebate khojasteh khedmate hozooretun khoshamad arz mikonam [...] va ejazeh mikhamam ke khanevadeh bandeh ra khedmatetun mo'arefi konam.*

'In the Name of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful. To the **presence** of Mr [Family Name], Mrs [Family Name], **honourable ladies and gentlemen**, [...] I bid you welcome on this blessed occasion [...] and I request your permission to introduce my [lit. the servant's] family to **your presence**.'

He then proceeded to introduce his own relatives and those of his wife's, one at a time, and then asked Ali's father to do the same, to which he responded using similar honorifics. As the eldest male at the assembly, Mariam's paternal grandfather then took control of the proceedings, being entitled to speak because of his age, gender and position as the family patriarch. He began by nominally asking the maternal grandfather and Ali's father for permission to speak to the assembly. Like his son, he used Persian honorifics towards the groom and his family, detailing the terms that the two sets of parents had agreed upon. The value of the bridal gift (500 gold coins) was explicitly mentioned, but despite his son's earlier comment, he did not show any sign of displeasure. He circulated a large ornate booklet which recorded all the terms, and each participant signed it as a token of agreement.

7. This extract is reconstructed from field notes and an audio recording. The ceremony took place in Tehran in February 2016.

8. The pragmatic and ritual functions of these honorifics are research topics for another paper.

In the days prior to the ceremony, Ali bought Mariam gold jewellery, chador and dress fabrics, shoes and a handbag, which Ali's mother had professionally arranged on tall floristry baskets. These were sent to Mariam's house in advance of the ceremony, where they were displayed in front of the couple's two-seater. After the booklet was signed, Mariam's paternal uncles carried the baskets around the guests, who expressed their admiration, gave thanks to Ali's family and exchanged wishes for a happy and long married life. The flowery chador fabric was unpinned from the basket, Mariam then stood up and Ali threw the fabric over her head. It was then measured by her maternal aunt and cut to the required length for stitching.

Extract 2.<sup>9</sup>

In this case, I was the wife of the groom's eldest maternal uncle. This match had followed the traditional path described earlier, in that a mutual acquaintance suggested that the groom's family should approach the family of the bride (Hanieh) with a view to proposing marriage. According to the groom's mother, after the young couple had spoken in private on a couple of occasions and their relationship appeared to be progressing well, she broached the issue of the bridal gift with Hanieh's mother and eldest sister. She said that, in her son's view, the value of the bridal gift should be such that he, Reza, would be able to pay it should his wife ever demand it. Fortunately, both Reza and his family were in favour of the modest sum of 110 Azadi coins, a symbolic number in Islamic numerology as it represents the name of the first Shi'a Imam, Ali.

The *baleh-boroon* ceremony was hosted by Hanieh's parents in a hired hall on the birthday of Fatima Zahra, the Prophet's daughter, the day on which Women's/Mother's Day was also celebrated. When all the guests had arrived, Hanieh and Reza sat on a two-seater sofa on a raised dais facing the guests, with both fathers standing on the platform to the left of the groom. One of Hanieh's paternal cousins stood on the side of the platform holding an ornate booklet and addressed the audience as follows:

1. *Bismillah-e Rahman-e Raheem*  
'In the name of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful'
2. *Ba kasbe ejازه az bozorgtarane majles va hizzare mohtaram, khedmatetun arz konam ke...*  
'With the permission of the elders of this assembly, I bring to your attention that...'

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9. This extract is transcribed from the notes of a conversation with Reza's mother and a video recording. This ceremony took place in Tehran, in March 2018.

3. *Be name aan ke eshq ra afarid va nahale mohebbat dar vujude ensan ha kasht, ba setayeshe*  
‘In the name of Him who created Love and planted the sapling of affection in the human psyche, and in worship...’
4. *Khodavande mota’al va ba dorooode bikaran be hazrate Mohammad salla Allah*  
‘of God the Exalted, and with endless salutations to Muhammad, peace be upon him...’  
(Participants in unison recite a salutation<sup>10</sup> to the Prophet and his household)
5. *Va arze tabrik baraye salrooze veladate ba sa’adate Hazrate Fatemeh salamolla aleiha va...*  
‘And with the humble offer of wishes on the blessed birthday of the Lady Fatima, peace be upon her and...’
6. *Rooze Madar va Rooze Zan, rooze peyvande va shorou’ e zendegi aqaye Reza va dooshizeh Hanieh aghaz gardid.*  
‘... Women’s and Mother’s Day, the day of the union and beginning of the married life of Mr Reza and Miss Hanieh has begun.’
7. *Khoda ya! Ma ra yari kon ke dar zibatarin rooze zendegi parvaze moshtarak ra aghaz konim...*  
‘God! On this, the most beautiful day of our lives, help us begin our joint flight...’
8. *Hamchon do ta parvaneh dar yek pileh, Pileh be name zendegi, ba gozare zaman do*  
‘... like two butterflies in one cocoon named “married life”, and as time passes, the two...’
9. *deldadeh dooshizeh [Hanieh] va aqaye [Reza] be sonnate elahi ye khish amal nemoodeh va dast dar*  
‘devoted [partners] Miss Hanieh and Mr Reza, practising their divine tradition [i.e. marriage] ...’
10. *dast hamdigehe rahe zendegi ra be sooye hadaf aghaz minamaeiand.*  
‘... are setting out on their journey of married life towards their goal, holding each other’s hand.’
11. *Shara’ete in peyvande moqaddaseshun ra be in gooneh dar rooze [DATE] moqarar midarim:*  
‘On this day [DATE], we set out the conditions of their holy union thus:’
12. *Yek jelde kalamollah majid; yek shakhe nabat; yek jam-e aeeneh o shamdan mehr o sonneh*  
‘A copy of the glorious Qur’an; one stick of crystallised sugar; a mirror and [two] candlesticks following the tradition of ...’

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10. Again, the pragmatic and ritual functions of salutations are areas of research in their own right.

13. *hazrate Fatemeh salamollah aleiha; va 110 sekkeh tamam bahare Azadi be niy-ate name*  
 ‘... the Holy Fatima, peace be upon her; and 110 full Azadi coins to reflect the blessed name ...’
14. *mobarake hazrate Ali aleih os salam. Salavat khatt befarmaeid.*  
 ‘... of the Holy Ali, peace be upon him. Please offer a salutation [to the Prophet and his household].  
 (Participants in unison recite a salutation to the Prophet and his household)

The speaker asks both fathers to take a seat while he hands Reza and Hanieh the booklet to sign. The two fathers step down from the platform and take their seats, and the booklet is passed to them for signing. Both mothers-in-law then come along to sign, followed by the elders of each family, in alternative order and in descending order of age. Reza’s mother presented Hanieh with a length of dress fabric and an engagement ring.

#### 4.1.1 Interpretation of the ceremonies of “exchange of promise to marry”

Extracts 1 and 2 are examined in terms of Kádár’s ritual schema of *recurrence*, *liminality*, *embodiment of the moral order* and *emotivity*. My data suggest that these four elements and the element of *ostensivity*, although it has been identified separately here for the purpose of analysis, are in fact intertwined in the interactions and are experienced in a holistic way by the participants, as post-event comments would appear to suggest. It should also be noted that since the extracts are ritualistic and feature recurrent elements, the analysis focuses on only a few indicative examples.

##### – Recurrence

Common recurrent patterns are obvious in the two *baleh-boroon* ceremonies analysed above. They both begin with a formal welcome and respectful address by a member of the bride’s family, include an announcement of the terms which have previously been agreed and ostensive, ritual ratifications (the reciting of salutations and signing the booklet). They both have a gift presentation/exchange as ratification of the union in the presence of an audience.

##### – Liminality

Various modes of liminality are also present, with one mode being reminiscent of classical anthropological texts regarding a bride’s separation from her family and her future incorporation in her husband’s family. These ceremonies occupy the space “betwixt and between” from non-acquaintance to acquaintance to in-law kinship for the extended families, and for the couple’s status as unattached

individuals to becoming betrothed. In another mode, when the verbal and non-verbal interaction is out of the ordinary, liminality is manifested through the formal means of address which can be observed in both extracts, the announcement of the imminent match and its ratification by both families, and the evocation of a sense of occasion. The presence of the audience and the modes of expression (e.g. respectful address and reference, salutations to the Prophet) highlight the ostensive character of this ritual.

– Emotivity

The *baleh-boroon* ritual evokes various feelings, depending on the attitudes of the individual participants. The use of respectful other-raising and self-lowering honorifics and terms of address in the speeches given by Mariam's father and grandfather generate cordiality and warmth in the new relationships (Koutlaki 1997, 195ff.) and enhance the face of all the participants because they are carried out ostensibly and in the presence of an audience. Several literary tropes in the elder's speech in Extract 2 also produce emotional effects. The image of the two butterflies in one cocoon flying towards their 'goal' (Extract 2, lines 8–10) publicly and ostensibly projects the couple's togetherness and affection. Feelings of well-being and the hope of future blessings are evoked through the choice of auspicious day and the choice of 110 coins (an auspicious number) for the *mehriyeh*, as well as mentioning the Holy Fatima's *mehriyeh* (Extract 2, lines 12–13).

– Embodiment of the moral order

Numerous manifestations of the embodiment of the moral order, such as references to religious precepts and religious figures as role models, are observable. For example, 'practising their divine tradition [i.e. marriage]' (Extract 2, line 9) implies that by entering into matrimony the young couple are adhering to the moral order which was established by religious figures. The reference to 'a mirror and [two] candlesticks following the tradition of the Holy Fatima' (lines 12–13) also indexes the couple's piety.

Apart from highlighting a religious connection, the upholding of the moral order can also be achieved by omission. Speakers can work towards the same interactional achievement by omitting references to issues that could be evaluated negatively such as the couple's previous relationship or the fact that in Extract 1, contrary to custom, the two families bought a flat for the couple in their joint names. Iranians often read as much from omissions as they do from ostensible behaviour.

As components of the moral order, traditional gender roles are also re-enacted throughout these rituals. Despite the fact that women with their social knowledge and experience are instrumental in shaping the new relationship (making the

first contact, smoothing out details of the terms in private, often acting as the spokesperson for their family), they are not assigned any formal roles during ceremonial occasions, such as the *baleh-boroon*, when male elders (Mariam's father and grandfather in Extract 1 and Hanieh's paternal cousin in Extract 2) are ostensibly in charge. Male elders lead the proceedings by addressing the guests and announcing the terms of the match, and thus project an image of playing the leading role, as they do in society. In Extract 1, Ali draped the chador fabric over Mariam's head in a symbolic, ostensible gesture of taking her under his protection and care. Despite the fact that Mariam is a postgraduate student who also works, with her salary contributing to the household, and, contrary to conventions, her family shared equally in the purchase of the couple's flat, this public gesture highlights ostensive adherence to the moral order, as laid down by Islamic law and understood by large numbers of Muslims.

– Ostensivity

The above analysis shows that ostensivity co-exists with, and is observed in, the other ritual elements of the schema; this point is highlighted by the fact that the following references to the previous extracts may sound repetitive. In Extract 1, Mariam's and Ali's fathers establish their own positions and those of others by lowering themselves and raising others in a process that can be seen as mimetic (Kádár 2013, 74 and *passim*) and ostensible, i.e. it does not reflect the social reality experienced by the participants. The speaker is older than all the other participants and is simply going through the motions of projecting humility and deference.<sup>11</sup> This ostensivity is observed in the use of Persian honorifics as well as other expressions of humility and deference, such as asking for permission, and works on the construction of a mutual face for both speakers and participants.

Ostensivity can also be seen in several aspects of these ceremonies, such as the public announcement of the *mehriyeh* and the signing of the booklet, as well as the display of gifts. The signing of the booklet does not have any legal significance: only the signing of the register after the official wedding ceremony (*aqd*) has legal weight. Nonetheless, the witnessing of the written agreement in the presence of elders from both extended families makes it socially binding. The ostensivity evident in the public display of the groom's presents, the admiring and valedictory comments, the exchange of wishes and the draping of fabric over the bride's head also indexes respect and appreciation towards the groom's family and goodwill between members of the newly acquainted families.

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11. For the principles of Persian politeness, see Koutlaki 1997, 2009, 120ff.



## 4.2 Official wedding ceremonies ('aqd)

The organisation and the expenses involved in the official wedding ceremony are always the responsibility of the groom's family. This is a 'deconstructive ritual', during which the bride's membership of her family is deconstructed. At this point, the change to 'officially married' status takes effect, and the bride formally joins the groom's family (Turner 1969; Kádár 2013, 142). As previously, the elements of *recurrence*, *liminality*, *embodiment of the moral order*, *emotivity* and *ostensivity* are observable, and discussed in more detail in Section 4.2.1.

Extract 3.<sup>12</sup>

After the *baleh-boroon* in Extract 2, lunch was hosted by the bride's parents and then the wedding party, along with the closest relatives, drove to a marriage registration office in Tehran. This section of the proceedings was organised and paid for by the groom's parents.

The bride Hanieh and the groom Reza are seated beside each other at the head of a large, elaborate 'marriage spread' laid out on the floor. It contains symbolic elements of a prosperous married life. They are reading from a large volume of the Quran that is open on their laps. Above their bent heads, female relatives are holding the four corners of an oblong, embroidered piece of white cloth, over which another female relative is grinding two cones of crystallised sugar throughout the ceremony.

The marriage officiant greets the guests and offers wishes for the occasion, as in Extract 2. At particular points during his speech participants respond with salutations to the Prophet and his household. He quotes a couple of Quranic lines on the blessings of married life and the holy tradition in which the Prophet is reported as saying that marriage is his tradition. He then addresses Hanieh's father:

- 1 [Officiant]: *Jenabe aqaye X, vali-ye zowjeh, ejazeh hast?*  
'Mr X, [legal] guardian of the bride-to-be, do I have your permission?'
- 2 [Hanieh's Father]: *Bale.*  
'Yes indeed.'
- 3 [Officiant]: *Dooshizeh mohtarameh mokarameh baleqeh adeleh sarkar khanum Hanieh*  
'Respected, honoured, intellectually mature and righteous, Miss Hanieh ...'
- 4 [Officiant]: *valede Ali, aya vakilam, ta ba sedaq-e yek jelde Kalamollahe Majid, yek jam'e aeeneh o do shamdan, be enzemame 110 sekkeh tamame*

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12. This extract is transcribed from a video recording. This ceremony took place in Tehran on the afternoon of the same day as the ceremony in Extract 2, in March 2018.

*Bahare Azadi, shoma ra be 'aqde da'em jenabe aqaye mohandes Reza, valed Mohamad, dar avaram?*

'... daughter of Ali, do you grant the servant [i.e. me] authority to contract a permanent marriage with Mr Engineer Reza with the following *mehriyeh*? A copy of the Glorious Qur'an, a mirror and two candlesticks, and a total of 110 full Azadi coins?'

5 [Hanieh's sister]: *Aroos mashghoole khundane sureh Ya Seen hastand.*

'The bride is reading the *Ya-Seen* chapter [of the Qur'an].'

6 [Officiant]: *Khoda qabul kone. Baraye bare dovvom tekrar mikonam:*

'May God accept [this act of worship]. I repeat for the second time:' [repeats as in lines 4–6].

7 [Hanieh's sister]: *Aroos mashghoole khundane sureh A'ala hastand.*

'The bride is reading the *A'ala* chapter [of the Qur'an].'

8 [Officiant]: *Insha Allah ke bare sevvom javabe mosbat begirim:*

'God willing, we will receive a positive answer third time round:' [repeats as in lines 4–6].

9 [Hanieh]: *Ba ejazeh pedar o madaram va hameh ye bozorgtar-ha, baleh.*

'With the permission of my father and my mother, and all the elders, I do.'

(All participants applaud; some women ululate. The white fabric over the couple's heads is put away.)

10 [Officiant]: *Sabr konid, damad ke bale nagofteh.* [He cracks a joke]

'Wait, the groom has not said "I do."'

(The white fabric is again stretched over the couple's heads. The groom laughs, guests joke.)

11 [Officiant]: *Jenabe aqaye mohandes Reza, farzande Mohamad, aya bandeh vakilam..*

'Engineer Mr Reza, son of Mohammad, do you grant the servant [i.e. me] authority ...'

12 ... *ta dooshizeh mokarameh khanume Hanieh be aqde daeme shoma ra dar biavaram?*

'... to contract a permanent marriage with the respected young lady Miss Hanieh?'

13 [Reza]: *Ba ejazeh bozorgtar ha ye jam, pedar o madaram, bale.*

'With the permission of the elders of the assembly, my father and mother, I do.'

The officiant recites the marriage sermon in Arabic, asks the participants to offer salutations to the Prophet, and concludes the ceremony with a series of suppli-

cations for healthy progeny, marital harmony, health and longevity, after each of which the participants respond in unison with ‘Amen.’

The traditional, universal pattern of the ritual of double answer avoidance by the bride is ‘the bride has gone to pick rose-flowers’ the first time, and ‘the bride has gone to extract rose-water’ the second time. This is a universally recognisable scene by all Iranians, and one that, according to the numerous informants I have interviewed and the considerable number of ceremonies I have witnessed, is almost never deviated from. However, Extract 3 features a variation on this universal response by replacing the flower-picking motif with the motif of reading from the holy book. A similar variation took place during the official wedding ceremony of the couple featured in Extract 1, as shown in Extract 4 below.

Extract 4.<sup>13</sup>

Mariam and Ali’s official wedding ceremony took place in the shrine of the Holy Fatima Ma’sumeh in Qom.<sup>14</sup> When the officiant asked Mariam for the first time, Mariam’s mother said, *Aroos rafteh az Hazrate Ma’sumeh ejazeh begire* (‘The bride has gone to ask for the Holy Ma’sumeh’s permission’). The second time around, Mariam’s mother said, *Aroos rafteh az Imam Zaman ejazeh begire* (‘The bride has gone to ask for the Imam of Time’s<sup>15</sup> permission’).

Even though Extracts 3 and 4 featured acceptable variations of the traditional pattern, the film featured in Extract 5 has a similar scene where the traditional Iranian ritual is disrupted by the non-Iranian bride.

Extract 5.<sup>16</sup>

In the film *Ketab-e Qanoon*, a Lebanese bride (Juliette/Ameneh) marries an Iranian (Rahman). Shortly before this sequence, she embraced Islam and changed her name from Juliette to Ameneh. The sequence begins with Ameneh and Rahman seated beside each other, while female relatives hold a white cloth over their heads, with one of them grinding two pieces of crystallised sugar over it. The female participants ululate in celebration, along with Ameneh. With the exception of Rahman’s youngest sister, Rahman’s close female relatives do not join in. Their body language and facial expressions convey their displeasure throughout the sequence.

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13. This extract was reported to me by Ali’s sister, who was present at the ceremony in spring 2016. It is reconstructed here from the account by Ali’s sister.

14. She is an eighth generation female descendant of the Prophet of Islam. She died and was buried in the city.

15. The Mahdi, or the Promised Messiah, who, according to Shi’a belief, went into occultation in the 10th century AD and will reappear at the end of time to establish justice in the world.

16. Transcribed from the film.

- 1 [Rahman's mother, who disapproves of the foreign bride, in a loud voice]:  
*Saket!*  
 'Quiet!'

(Ululation stops)

- 2 [Rahman's elder sister, as an aside to Rahman's mother]: *Be haqqe chiz ha-i nadideh o nashenideh! Che ma'ni dare ke aroos kel bekeshe!*  
 'Of all the unseen and unheard things! What is this supposed to mean, the bride to ululate!'
- 3 [Rahman's younger sister, the only one of Rahman's family who is supportive of Ameneh, as an aside to her elder sister to express her annoyance]: *Chi karesh dari? Chob, jalebe barash! Bekesh, zan dadash, bekesh.* (Begins to ululate again; the bride and other female relatives join in.)  
 'Leave her alone! She likes it! [addresses Ameneh] Carry on, sister-in-law!'
- 4 [Rahman's maternal aunt, as an aside]: *Che jelaflat-ha!*  
 'What frivolity!'
- 5 [Rahman's paternal aunt addressing the officiant who is seated opposite the couple]: *Khutbah ra jari konid, haj aqa.*  
 'Recite the marriage sermon, sir.'
- 6 [Officiant]: *Bismillah-e Rahman-e Raheem ...*  
 'In the name of God, the compassionate, the merciful ...'

(Ululation has been continuing since line 3)

- 7 [Rahman's mother, annoyed, in a loud voice]: *Saket!*  
 'Quiet!'

(Ululation stops)

- 8 [Officiant]: *Alhamdulillah-e Rabb il Alameen ...*  
 'Praise be to God, Lord of the worlds ...'
- 9 *Qala Rasulollah (salla Allah-u aleih wa sallam), an – nikah-u sonnati.*  
 'The Prophet (peace be upon him) said, "Marriage is my tradition."
- 10 *Ba meimanat o shadi, peivande in zowj-e khoshbakht, ya'ni aqaye Rahman Tavana va dooshizeh Ameneh Khamseh ra be fal-e nik migirim ...*  
 'With blessings and happiness, we celebrate the auspicious occasion of the union of this blissful couple, that is Mr Rahman Tavana and Miss Ameneh Khamseh ...'
- 11 *... ke insha Allah zendegi-e khosh o sabz-o shorou' benamayand.*  
 '... so that they start a happy and prosperous life, God willing.'
- 12 [Officiant addresses Rahman's mother]: *Khob, haj khanum, meqdar-e mehriyeh che qadr moshakhass shode?*  
 'Well, respected lady, how much has been agreed for the *mehriyeh*?'

13 [Rahman's mother]: *Vallah, chi begam haj aqa? Rahman, madar, mehriasho be chand ta sekkeh ta'afiq kardid?*

'Well, I really don't know what to say, respected sir ... (turns to Rahman): Rahman, my son, how many coins have you agreed on for her bridal gift?'

14 [Rahman]: *Vallah, madar, ma ru hichi ta'afiq nakardim ... ya'ni harfesh pish nayamad.*

'To be honest, mother, we have not agreed on anything ... I mean, the topic didn't come up.'

(Rahman's mother, wide-eyed and shocked, stares at him.)

15 [Rahman to Ameneh]: *Juliette?*

16 [Ameneh]: *Ameneh.*

17 [Rahman asks Ameneh]: *Mehriyeh ra chand bebandim ke ham Khoda razi bashe, ham khalq-e Khoda?*

'How much shall we write down, so that both God and God's creatures [i.e. humans] be content?'

18 [Ameneh]: *Ab.*

'Water.'

19 [Rahman]: *Janam? Ab mikhahi?*

'Sorry? Do you want some water?'

20 [Ameneh] *Ab. Mehriyeh man abe.*

'Water. My mehriyeh is water.'

21 [Rahman's mother]: *Vaaaa! In chi migeh, madar?*

'What? What is she saying, my son?'

22 [Rahman's elder sister, mockingly]: *Akhe, abam shodeh mehriyeh? Bepors chand ta tanker?*

'What kind of mehriyeh is water? Ask her, how many tankers?'

23 [Ameneh to the officiant]: *Haji aqa, kabin-e man ab ast. Faqat yek kalameh benevisid: ab.*

'Respected sir, my mehriyeh is water. Just write down one word: water.'

(Rahman's mother, paternal and maternal aunts and cousin look at the officiant, stunned.)

24 [Officiant]: *Besyar khob. Pas aroos khanum, aya bandeh wakil hastam ta shoma ra be aqde da'emi ye aqaye Rahman-e Tavana, be sedaq ye jelde Kalam-ollah Rabbani, yek jam ayeneh, yek zowj-e shamdan, va mahriyeh moshakhass shodeh dar biavaram? Aroos khanum, vakilam?*

'Very well. So, lady bride, do you authorise this servant [i.e. me] to contract a permanent marriage to Mr Rahman Tavana, with a present of a volume of the Holy Quran, a mirror, a pair of candlesticks, and the aforementioned mehriyeh? Do you authorise me?'

- 25 [Rahman's elder sister, disdainfully]: *Aroos rafteh gol bechine.*  
 'The bride has gone to pick flowers.'
- 26 [Ameneh]: *Koja raftam gol bechinam? Man ke inja hastam! Haji aqa, ari.*  
 'Where have I gone to pick rose-flowers? I am right here! Yes indeed, respected sir.'

(Feminine laughter is heard in the background.)

- 27 [Officiant]: *Ari?*  
 'Yes indeed?'
- 28 [Ameneh] *Ari.*  
 'Yes indeed.'
- 29 [Rahman] *Ari, hamun moadabaneh balast digeh, haj aqa.*  
 "'Yes indeed" is just the polite version of "I do", respected sir.'
- 30 [Officiant, smiling]: *Besyar khob, pas mobarak bashe.*  
 'Very well then, may this marriage be blessed, congratulations.'

(Women ululate in celebration; they approach the couple offering their wishes, while the following conversation takes place as an aside among Rahman's close relatives.)

- 31 [Rahman's mother, annoyed, as an aside]: *Dokhtareh kholochel, nagzasht khotbeh khundeh beshe.*  
 'The simple-minded, brainless girl! She couldn't even wait for the marriage formula to be pronounced.'
- 32 [Rahman's paternal aunt]: *Az bas ke hole!*  
 'Because she's desperate!'

#### 4.2.1 Interpretation of official wedding ceremonies

In keeping with the analysis of Extracts 1 and 2, the five elements of ritual co-exist in the flow of the interactions. Examples are given for the sake of analysis, but are illustrations of more than one element.

##### – Recurrence

Recurrent patterns are also observed in *'aqd* ceremonies, from the set-up (e.g. the physical objects in the wedding spread, the positioning of the bride and groom) to the components of the ceremony: references to holy figures, the requests for the elders' and bride's permission, the bride's double avoidance ritual and the grinding of sugar cones. Ostensivity can also be observed in the recurrent patterns: although the presence of the elders, bride and groom signifies agreement to the match, the ritual requires a request to be ostensibly made and permission to be ostensibly granted, as in Extract 3.

### – Liminality

Participants appear to experience the ‘peak’ liminal moment just after the bride’s final response has been made following the double avoidance ritual, even though, legally, the marriage is not contracted until after the groom has granted permission and the marriage formula has been pronounced by the officiant. This is clear in Extract 3, when the white fabric is removed before the officiant asks Reza for his permission and the pronouncement of the marriage formula. Once again, manifestations of liminality are linked to ostensivity, as in the requesting and granting of permission to allow the officiant to solemnise the marriage, which marks and formalises the liminality in the presence of an audience.

Line 10 marks a momentary ‘stepping out’ of the ceremony with the officiant’s remark and the participants’ laughter: *Sabr konid, damad ke bale nagofteh*. ‘Wait, the groom has not said “I do.”’ Liminality also appears to be marked ostensibly through the recitation of salutations, which evokes the presence of the Holy Prophet and the Imams as witnesses. After this ceremony, the couple have crossed over the final threshold and are legally married, with both their families now being related by marriage.

### – Emotivity

An official marriage ceremony is an occasion in which a number of emotive states of mind are evident. In Extracts 3 and 4, where both families approved of the matches, it can be assumed that positive feelings are generally experienced. However, Extract 5 represents a situation in which the bride’s behaviour does not correspond to the other participants’ moral order, and clearly illustrates how “ritual actions tend to trigger feelings that reflect the interactants’ perception of how the liminal action of ritual affects them and relates to their moral orders” (Kádár 2017, 9). The film extract shows that various negative emotions are experienced by Rahman’s female relatives.

These negative emotions include ill-concealed displeasure, and anger and disapproval that Ameneh joins in the ululation on line 2, behaviour that runs counter to the Iranian ideal of a modest, reticent bride. Rahman’s relatives also express consternation and shock with the *mehriyeh* issue (line 14 and 21–22). They are also shown to experience acute embarrassment at the way Ameneh directly addresses the officiant on line 23 and dismisses the double response avoidance ritual with a non-standard answer (line 26) which is also highlighted by the women’s laughter in the background.

It could be argued that these emotions are partly triggered by the breach of the expected recurrent pattern; moreover, the significance of the ostensible double

response avoidance lies in ostensible conformity to an ideal moral order, not in its factual accuracy, and the film director utilises this dissonance for comic effect.

– Embodiment of the moral order

As in the *baleh-boroon* extracts, moral order is manifested in the official wedding ceremonies in a number of ways. In Extracts 3 and 5, the officiants begin their speech with reference to marriage being the Prophet's tradition, which implies that, by following him as a role model, the couple will enter into this desirable state. If Extract 5 presents a radical departure from the established ritual, Extracts 3 and 4 present interesting variations, which, nonetheless, continue to fit into the traditional mould of the ritual and reinforce the moral order of the image that a bride should project, and how and when she should speak. The double response avoidance is the only instance in which the bride and other female participants are expected to speak to the assembly during *'aqd* ceremonies. As previously mentioned, the recurrent pattern of the double response avoidance also indexes the bride's ostensible conformity to traditional gender ideals and the prevalent moral order: a young, virginal bride should be restrained and shy, and not appear too eager to express her agreement to the match. This is clearly highlighted in the comments made by Rahman's mother and paternal aunt on lines 2 and 31–32.

These lines clearly show their annoyance and are addressed semi-privately to other like-minded participants, and not to the whole congregation. One exception is when Rahman's mother is asked about the *mehriyeh* in the absence of her dead husband, and the same applies to his paternal aunt when she instructs the officiant to begin the ceremony.

The mothers and sisters of the two grooms in Extracts 3 and 4 expressed the view that opting for religious motifs of the double answer avoidance indexes the piety of the bride's family as well as invokes divine blessings for the union.

## 5. Discussion and conclusion

This paper set out to make an empirical and a theoretical contribution through the presentation of a small sample of Iranian marriage rituals, and to examine the extent to which Kadar's ritual schema can be applied to such rituals. The analysis demonstrates that the four elements identified in Kádár's (2017) definition of ritual (*recurrence, liminality, embodiment of the moral order* and *emotivity*) are present and often co-exist in the two types of Iranian marriage rituals under examination. It also demonstrates that a fifth element, *ostensivity*, is an important factor in Iranian wedding rituals, and is obviously linked with being seen



to conform to social expectations. Through ostensivity, i.e., through the actors *being seen* to conform to established patterns of behaviour, such as ideal gender identities, adherence to the established moral order and maintenance of tradition, participants jointly work towards the complex interactional achievement of establishing new relationships, reinforcing group bonds and social solidarity (Kertzer 1988, 69) and projecting and enhancing their collective and individual face.

On a theoretical level, the paper follows on from Koutlaki's previous work, which focused extensively on the principles of Iranian politeness (deference, humility and cordiality) realised through *ta'arof* (Iranian ritual politeness) strategies (1997, 81ff; 2002). Although she did not use the term 'ostensivity', Koutlaki (1997, 2002, 2009) showed that ostensible adherence to politeness principles and the (often ostensible) practice of *ta'arof* are closely linked with face maintenance and enhancement for all participants and bystanders (1997, 201ff.; 2009). The current study shows that ostensivity lies at the heart of marriage ceremonies.

The present study also shows that ostensivity permeates the elements of recurrence, liminality, emotivity and embodiment of the moral order, as identified in Kadar's 2017 schema. Therefore, the words in bold (taken from Kádár 2017, xvi and 87) should be added to his definition (Kádár 2017, 12):

[R]itual is a formalized and recurrent action, which is relationship forcing; that is, by operating, it reinforces/transforms interpersonal relationships. Ritual is realized as an embedded liminal (mini)performance **in front of a real or imaginary audience**, and this performance is bound to relational history (and related moral order), or historicity in general (and related moral order). Ritual is an emotively invested action, as anthropological research has shown.

At present, Iranian society appears to be in a state of transition from traditional, collective patterns to contemporary, more individualistic ones, a trend which is more pronounced in the capital Tehran. It could be argued that variations in the traditional double answer avoidance ritual could be seen to signify a timid tendency towards indexing an individual identity, while at the same time conforming to established patterns (indexing ostensible coyness and reluctance) as moral order dictates. Even though traditional forms of matchmaking are changing within the younger Iranian generation, it was also seen that external forms are still retained through potent rituals.

This paper suggests several areas for future research. This is the first published work to define and analyse the concept of ostensivity in ritual; as new data become available from other social rituals, such as funerary rites, and from other lesser studied cultures, there is clearly a need to theoretically refine the concept of ostensivity and to further analyse its links to the audience (Kádár 2013, 2017, 87ff.).

Future research in this area could further examine the close links of ostensivity with *ta'arof*, the understanding of moral order(s) and face considerations, as the practice of *ta'arof* is undergoing gradual changes, particularly amongst younger Iranians. Thus, it is hoped that this work will provide some stimulus for research into more diverse areas of Persian pragmatics and ritual among Iranians.

## Acknowledgements

Many thanks to Daniel Kádár, Juliane House, Rosina Marquez-Reiter and my two anonymous reviewers for their insightful comments on earlier drafts of this paper. Any remaining weaknesses are my own responsibility.

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## **Publication history**

Date received: 25 April 2019

Date accepted: 2 December 2019

Published online: 18 December 2019