

# **In Lulije's Shoes**

## **Doing Gender and Family in Rural Kosovo**

by

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## Abstract

My thesis describes the practices associated with being a rural Kosovo *nuse*, an Albanian word referring to both brides and young married women. These practices, which Kosovo people regard as prescribed by tradition, include but are not limited to wearing distinctive outfits and jewelry and performing specific tasks such as serving refreshments to in-laws and visitors. I frame these practices as doing gender and family and explore how they facilitate the creation and maintenance of affinal relationships in the context of the still widespread patrilocality of rural Kosovo. I pay special attention to the rich material culture, which accompanies *nuse* performances, and briefly engage with their embodied nature. A fictional account is woven into the text with the aim to bring closer the complexity and minutiae of the wedding rituals and the patrilocal life afterwards.

**Keywords:** doing gender; doing family; material culture; embodiment; everyday and ritual life; ethnographic fiction

In memory of Sonja Luehrmann, a bright, everlasting lodestar

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## Characters in Lulije's Story

The characters on the list are ordered alphabetically with the exception of the main characters Lulije and Ilir who are listed first. The list is provided for readers' convenience and contains only the named characters.

Lulije	the bride
Ilir	the groom
Ali	Ilir's father
Arianit	Lulije's younger teenage brother
Arif	Lulije's father
Ariona	Ilir's youngest sister, a teenager living at home with her parents and Ilir
Arta	a young woman from Ilir's <i>mahalla</i> , one of Safete's daughters-in-law; recently got married
Behare	a middle-aged woman from Ilir's <i>mahalla</i> ; one of Mihane's sisters-in-law
Blerta	a young woman from Ilir's <i>mahalla</i> ; Bukurie's daughter
Bukurie	a middle-aged woman from Ilir's <i>mahalla</i> ; one of Mihane's sisters-in-law
Era	Krenare's eldest daughter
Ermal	Lulije's elder brother
Fatmire	Ilir's second sister, married
Flutura	a woman from Ilir's <i>mahalla</i> ; one of Behare's daughters-in-law
Genciana	a cousin of Ilir's; works as a hairdresser
Halime	Lulije's mother
Hatixhe	Ilir's maternal aunt who also happens to be the wife of one of Lulije's paternal uncles; she introduced Ilir and Lulije to one another
Jon	a boy from Ilir's <i>mahalla</i> ; one of Shqipe's sons
Krenare	Lulije's elder sister
Kumrije	one of Lulije's paternal aunts
Mihane	Ilir's mother
Miranda	a sister-in-law of Krenare's; Krenare's daughter, Era, mentions her when she compares Lulije's jewelry to Miranda's
Muhamet	one of Lulije's paternal uncles

Naim	one of Lulije's paternal uncles
Qëndresa	Ilir's eldest sister; married
Rina	a school friend of Lulije's
Safete	a middle-aged woman from Ilir's mahalla; one of Mihane's sisters-in-law
Shqipe	a woman from Ilir's <i>mahalla</i> ; one of Safete's daughters-in-law
Xhemajl	one of Ilir's paternal uncles; lives in Germany and owns a small construction company; arranged Ilir's work visa for Germany by enlisting him as worker for his company

## Glossary and pronunciation guide

### Pronunciation of some special characters in the Kosovo Albanian dialect

<i>Albanian character</i>	IPA symbol	Pronunciation example in English
C c	ts	As in <u>tsunami</u>
Ç ç	tʃ	As in <u>church</u> . Same pronunciation as q
Dh dh	ð	As in <u>either</u>
Ë ë	ə	As in <u>perk</u>
Gj, gj	dʒ	As in <u>jungle</u> . Same pronunciation as xh
J j	j	As in <u>young</u>
Ll ll	l	As in <u>thrill</u>
Nj, nj	ɲ	As in <u>new</u>
Q q	tʃ	As in <u>church</u> . Same pronunciation as ç
Rr rr	r	Trilled r
Sh sh	ʃ	As in <u>sugar</u>
th	θ	As in <u>tooth</u>
X x	dz	As in <u>adze</u>
Xh xh	dʒ	As in <u>jungle</u> . Same pronunciation as gj
Y y	y	As French u in <u>tu</u>
Zh zh	z	As in <u>pleasure</u>

There are some nasal vowels in Northern Albanian (including Kosovo), like ã in *nanë* ‘mother’, ã in the second *i* of *dimi* ‘Turkish trousers’, ë in *vjehërr* ‘mother-in-law’ etc.

## Glossary

<i>bakshish, bakshishe</i>	(here) money or jewelry offered to the bride as a gift by guests attending the feast; also means tip
<i>bijë</i> (def. <i>bija</i> , pl. <i>bija</i> )	daughter; (also in a more general sense) woman related to a household through blood ties rather than marriage
<i>çaj</i> ( <i>rusi</i> )	black tea served in small Turkish glasses; if a household has a <i>nuse</i> , it is her task to prepare it and offer it to the family and any visitors
<i>çeiz</i>	trousseau; nowadays it consists of towels and sheets decorated with handmade lace as well as handmade doilies; in the past it was larger and included clothing items
<i>çika jeme</i>	my daughter; (literally) my girl
<i>dada</i>	elder sister
<i>dajët</i>	maternal uncles; (more generally) the mother's parental home from the viewpoint of her children
<i>dallam</i>	a coat in black or another dark colour embroidered with silver or gold; it reaches the middle of the calf; it can be with or without sleeves; it is worn over a shirt or a light dress; nowadays it is a clothing item reserved for young married women; see Image 11 in Appendix E
<i>dasmë</i> (def. <i>dasma</i> )	wedding
<i>def</i>	tambourine
<i>democrat</i>	(in this context) a progressive, open-minded man who does not put restrictions in his wife's movements, ambitions, and appearances
<i>dëshmor</i>	(literally) martyr; Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) fighter in the 1998-1999 war
<i>dimi</i> (pl. <i>tantum</i> )	Turkish trousers; made of twelve metres silk, lace or other material and arranged in folds around the woman's waist; nowadays worn exclusively by young married women; see Images 1, 4, 11
<i>djalë i hasretit</i> or <i>hasret</i>	an only son
<i>djali i kerrit</i>	(literally) boy of the carriage
<i>dukat</i> (def. <i>dukati</i> )	a bride's gold jewelry and gold in general; the word comes from the name of a coin used in Europe
<i>duvak</i>	veil
<i>faleminderit</i>	thank you

<i>familjarisht</i>	(literally) with the entire family; if a couple is said to have done it <i>familjarisht</i> or to have a relationship <i>familjarisht</i> , this means that their families were notified about their relationship and agreed that in due time the young people will get engaged and married; <i>familjarisht</i> refers to the families' involvement in and acceptance of the relationship
<i>fetar</i> (pl. <i>fetarë</i> )	devoted Muslim
<i>gurbetqarë</i>	migrants
<i>hoxhë</i> (def. <i>hoxha</i> )	Muslim cleric
<i>hyzmet</i>	service, care
<i>ishalla</i>	God willing, used very often as a synonym of "I hope"
<i>jelek</i>	sleeveless short vest embroidered in gold or silver and worn exclusively by <i>nuse</i>
<i>kanagjegj</i>	henna night; a feast hosted by the bride's family several days before the wedding; it is attended almost exclusively by women with the exception of the bride's closest male relatives; nowadays it resembles more a bachelorette party and only some brides choose to have the traditional henna ceremony and the accompanying lament; see Episode 6 of Lulije's story
<i>kule</i> (pl. <i>tantum</i> )	more comfortable Turkish trousers, made of less fabric with less folds than the <i>dimi</i> ; in the past worn in everyday life and nowadays worn by elderly women who never started wearing skirts; since the <i>dallam</i> is quite heavy, sometimes a <i>nuse</i> combines it with <i>kule</i> rather than <i>dimi</i>
<i>lira</i> (def.)	gold coin replica of the old <i>lira</i> which was in use in the Ottoman Empire until the 1920s; in Kosovo it is young married women who wear <i>liras</i> as jewelry
<i>loçka e vogël</i>	the little sweetheart
<i>lule</i>	flower; Lulije's name comes from this word; Lulije is a generic name reserved for songs only
<i>mahalla</i>	neighbourhood
<i>mahr</i> (Arab.), <i>mehër</i> (Alb.)	a gift which under Islamic law the groom is obliged to give to the bride before marriage
<i>marrje e dorës</i>	(literally) taking of the hand; a gesture of respect performed by young married women mostly towards their husband's female relatives
<i>mindil</i>	a decorative handkerchief which the leading dancer at a round dance waves in their right hand
<i>në opçinë</i>	at a married woman's parental home, especially from her and her husband's kin' perspective

<i>nanë</i> (def. <i>nana</i> )	mom, mother
<i>nuse shqiptare</i>	Albanian bride, often women would post their pictures in bridal attire on social media and add this phrase with a hashtag
<i>nuse</i> (def. <i>nusja</i> )	bride; young married woman
<i>odë</i> (def. <i>oda</i> )	(in the past) a separate room where men gathered, entertained their male guests and discussed important matters
<i>palidhje</i>	foolish
<i>për merak</i>	a person or a thing that has every virtue one could desire for
<i>peshqir</i>	towel; in the context of weddings, it is a towel decorated with lace and embroidery which the bride's family sends to the groom's family to show that they accept their marriage proposal
<i>pite</i>	phyllo pastry pie; it can have different fillings – meat, leafy greens, cheese; it is often the main dish in a Kosovo home
<i>plak</i> (m.) <i>plakë</i> (f.)	elder
<i>punë dore</i>	handiwork; something handmade
<i>qerek lira</i>	a smaller gold coin than the <i>lira</i> , but with identical inscriptions
<i>qyqek</i>	genre of music and dance quite popular in the Balkan region played mostly at weddings and on other joyful occasions
<i>sefte</i>	for the first time
<i>selam</i>	greeting, used among Muslims; has become synonymous with 'greetings' or 'say hi to someone' in English
<i>sofër</i>	a low round dining table used all over the Balkans in the past; people would sit down directly on the ground or on cushions around it
<i>surlë</i> (def. <i>surla</i> )	a wind instrument played in the Balkans and beyond that resembles a clarinet
<i>tasfes</i>	a small decorative headdress for <i>nuse</i>
<i>të/ju bëftë mirë</i>	a phrase similar to <i>bon appétit</i> ; (literally) I hope it does you good
<i>te nana</i>	at mother's; used in the context of a married woman visiting her parental home
<i>temena</i>	a gesture of respect which Kosovo <i>nuse</i> nowadays perform in front of their husband's female relatives; see Episode 11



<i>tupan</i>	a large double-headed drum used in Balkan and Middle Eastern music
<i>Urime fejesa!</i>	Congratulations on your engagement!
<i>vjehërr (def. vjehrri)</i>	father-in-law
<i>vjehërr (def. vjehrra)</i>	mother-in-law
<i>vullnet</i>	zeal, eagerness; also means 'will' or 'will power'
<i>Zoti ju dhashtë bereqet!</i>	May God give you abundance!; a guest's expression of gratitude for a treat

## Preface

*Nuse* is the Albanian word which readers will encounter most often in this text and hence its meaning needs to be clarified from the onset. It can be translated in English either as ‘bride’ or as ‘recently married young woman’. It is not a one-day experience, but a life-stage category and a status which starts with the woman’s marriage<sup>1</sup> and to which specific behaviours, appearances and performances are attached. Jane Sugarman who writes about Tosk Albanians in North Macedonia’s Prespa Region, observes that those Albanians saw a woman as normally passing through three stages: girl (*çupë* or, in Kosovo, *çikë*) – young married woman (*nuse*) – elder (*plakë*). These designations pull together gender, marital status and generation and are not determined in terms of a person’s specific age, but rather as “a progression of stages that is synchronized with that of other household members” (1997: 173-174, 177). It is difficult to pinpoint the end of the *nuse* period. Young-looking women of 40-50 with grown-up children fall in-between the categories of *nuse* and *plakë*. To my question how long they think one should wear the *nuse* clothes (like the ones in Image 1 below) or how long they wore them or planned to wear them, I got different answers: some said five years seemed enough, others were enthusiastic to dress up for at least twenty years or until their firstborn sons or daughters got married or until someone – for example, their mothers-in-law – told them that they were too old to dress up. However, one should not imagine that during all these years a *nuse* would dress up in the same manner or have the same tasks. The first *nuse* years are marked with the most extravagant clothing and the most deferential behaviour – several years of marriage and/or the birth of children usually reduces these ornamental aspects of the *nuse* attire and behaviour. The word *nuse* has the same form in the singular and plural, whereas *nusja* is the same word but with a definite article. Finally, while my thesis concerns Muslim Albanians in Kosovo, others in the Balkans – such as Albanians from other territories, Bosnians, Turks, or Serbs – will recognize some of the described practices and esthetics.

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<sup>1</sup> The marriages depicted in this thesis are all heterosexual. Kosovo’s constitution states that everyone has the right to marriage, however, the Family Code defines marriage as a union between a man and a woman (Law No. 2004/32 Family Law of Kosovo, Article 14). This situation is not unique to Kosovo; the legislations of many countries in southeastern Europe define marriage in such terms.



*Image 1. One of my interviewees, several years into her marriage. Here she dressed up to attend a feast.*

## Chapter 1.

### Introductions: Kosovo women, Lulije and the author

The storyteller takes what he tells from experience – his own or that reported by others. And he in turn makes it the experience of those who are listening to his tale.

The Storyteller, Walter Benjamin (Benjamin & Arendt 2019 [1968]: 31)

Once, when invited to go to a henna night in the neighbourhood, Fjolla (b. 1990) had to wait longer than usual at the hairdresser's to have her makeup and hair done, so when she got home, her female relatives had already left for the feast, and it was her husband who had to take her there. She dressed up in her traditional costume – Turkish trousers and a vest – but started sweating profusely, while they were still in the yard of their house. Seeing her makeup run down her face, her husband exclaimed: "Oh, Fjollë, what is going on with your face?! It has become all dappled." He had not seen her like that before. She explained that it was because of the clothes. "Let's go back and remove them then, and when you cool down, you will dress again and we will go," he suggested. "This would not work, I told him. I will sweat again as soon as I put them on," Fjolla recounts with laughter. "Then do not go at all," her husband said. "How come?" Fjolla replied, "I was at the hairdresser's, I dressed up, and now not to go?" So, she took some wet wipes and a fan and somehow managed. "Is it always like that when you dress up?" he asked baffled. "Always," Fjolla told him.

"Men don't know what we go through," I said, and we laughed.

### Research focus

Dressing up in uncomfortable clothes is one of the *nuse* practices which I set out to explore in this thesis. A whole persona emerges during the wedding – one that ideally looks beautiful, serves skillfully, and lives in harmony with her in-laws. The wedding and the *nuse* practices afterwards work to interpellate her into her new position of an adult woman and a member of her husband's family, but also enact and display these statuses. There is an inherent tension between liminality and belonging in a *nuse*'s practices and experience. From the beginning, I have been puzzled by the formulaic

character of almost everything *nuse*-related – there are elaborate rules of etiquette about how to greet people, how to serve tea and what gifts to buy for a future bride. These rules of etiquette instruct the young married woman and her affinal relatives who are relative strangers how to act around each other, how to work out their relationships, how to foster belonging.

In my text, I discuss both the *nuse* “rules” as my interlocutors formulated them as well as their actual practices. I am interested in the collective character of the *nuse* practices and how they serve to establish and maintain a newly married woman’s relationships with her new family. Drawing from gender performance theory (West and Zimmerman 1987; Butler 1999) and David Morgan’s conceptualization of family practices, I interpret the activities, behaviours and appearances of Kosovo recently married women as doing gender and family, a theoretical framework which I develop in Chapter 2. I also explore how the patrilocal living arrangement influences the *nuse* practices.

In this thesis, I also reflect on the embodied nature of the *nuse* practices by relating some of my interviewee’s and my own experiences. The problem with an account that relies exclusively on embodied experiences – which could be a promising project in Kosovo’s vibrant *nuse* culture – is that such experiences are rarely verbalized; thus, in the context of a short fieldwork and a fragmentary personal participation in the culture, it is only a supporting source and mode, an attempt to give flesh to my observations.

## **Data collection**

My fieldwork between the end of June and early August of 2019 yielded 27 interviews with women of different ages. All but one of the interviews were audio recorded. I also had two group conversations with middle-aged and elderly women. Additionally, I was fortunate to attend an engagement party, a henna night and a wedding. I also visited hair salons and bridal shops, staying in one bridal shop for about two hours. During my fieldwork I kept fieldnotes and made photographs and short videos. Some of my interviewees also shared with me personal photos and videos.

Social media are loaded with photos, videos and comments, a true paradise and/or a whirlpool for a beginning ethnographer. The YouTube videos of engagement, henna night, wedding and women's day celebrations, which I scrutinized in preparation for my fieldwork are in the hundreds, but many more are out there, new ones being posted every day. Additionally, I followed at least a dozen Instagram accounts – some managed by Kosovo bridal businesses advertising their goods, others reposting photos and short videos of beautiful Albanian brides. I watched television shows and videos related to weddings, funny videos, for example ridiculing the supposedly troublesome relationship between mothers- and daughters-in-law or representing a “typically Albanian wedding.” Wedding songs are a popular music genre in contemporary Kosovo, so I paid attention to them too, looking up their lyrics online or asking native speakers to help me decipher them. While only some of that material made it into my thesis, the constant flow of imagery and sound influenced my understanding of what it means to be a *nuse* in Kosovo.

### ***Semi-structured interviews***

My in-laws arranged all but one of my interviews, recruiting participants among their acquaintances and sometimes becoming interviewees themselves. In some cases, two or three interviewees belonged to the same family – for example, they were a mother and a daughter or a mother- and a daughter-in-law. When designing my research, I adopted the local category of *nuse* and chose to talk to women who were at that life stage and to others who were already past it. About half of my interviewees (n=14) were young women, born between 1989 and 1998. They were still considered *nuse*, as they had married in the five years prior to my fieldwork. I also interviewed thirteen women who had married before the Kosovo War (1998-1999). They were between 43 and 77 years old (see Appendices A and B).

Most of my interviewees live in villages close to Prishtina and Prizren. At the time of the fieldwork only five of the 27 women lived in a city; one later moved abroad and another to the city. According to the most recent population census of 2011, over 60% of Kosovo's population is rural (ASK 2011). In stark contrast to most villages in the Balkans, Kosovo's villages do not seem deserted. Quite the opposite, they show off many new brick two- and even three-story houses, some not plastered yet, with concrete stairs and porches in front of them, and flower beds. Rural residence gives extended-

family households – a widespread family model – more room than urban residents have. It also permits small kitchen gardens (fresh vegetables and fruit, eggs and chickens). Often brothers build their homes close to each other, so that they can continue to help each other. This practice creates neighbourhoods in which many people not only know each other but are also related to each other and interact on a daily basis.

One thing that distinguishes the lives of rural and urban women is that the former find it difficult to access higher education and employment opportunities, in large part because of persisting social pressures to stay home. Men are not in the same position – rural men commute daily to the capital Prishtina and other towns and cities for work. Urban and, especially, educated women are more likely to ignore, resist or mock the *nuse* practices than their rural counterparts are. However, neither education, nor urban residence are foolproof indicators for certain attitudes. Some thirty or forty years ago when a woman escaped to the city to get an education and pursue a career, she rejected the traditions associated with the *nuse* status (sometimes by remaining unmarried) because they often came in a package of oppressive practices, such as hard labour, virginity tests, and strict gender segregation. “If your mother asks me to be a bride, to kiss hands, I’ll run away during the night and return to my house”, Nadire Dida, b. 1930, a teacher interviewed for the *Kosovo Oral History Initiative*, reminisced she declared to her husband (Krasniqi, Krasniqi & Susuri). Nowadays, however, as the situation of women has improved and the *nuse* traditions have more of a symbolic value, the reactions of young, educated women living in the city are mixed. While one of my husband’s educated friends was surprised that I wore Turkish trousers which she seemed to consider backward, rustic and foreign (Turkish), many urban, educated women are keen to engage in the *nuse* traditions, especially in the dressing-up part. Erina (b. 1993) and Linda (b. 1996), and K., another educated friend of my husband’s, all of them urban residents with postsecondary education and jobs, gladly dressed up as *nuse* (including the Turkish trousers). Nevertheless, this small sample of women is not representative of all Kosovo Albanian women and more research of the contemporary urban *nuse* practices is necessary.

I conducted most interviews in participants’ homes or in their parental homes where they had come for a visit. On a few occasions I met with participants in the home of a third person who had established the contact. My ideal of one-to-one conversations was sometimes, for various reasons, not attainable and some of my interviewees ended

up telling their stories in the presence of other women, including my mother-in-law who accompanied me on many interviews. In such situations, it is likely that some interviewees censored their stories to avoid sharing unflattering views of their lives and circumstances in front of people alongside with whom they would continue to live.

The interviews loosely followed a broad questionnaire which covered all the wedding festivities and the everyday life afterwards. My own experience as a Kosovo *nuse* and my relatives' gracious instructions and explanations helped me see that the *nuse* performances are not limited to festive occasions but deeply inform a young married woman's everyday interactions with her affinal and parental family. I knew that limiting my questions to either the ritual or the everyday life would provide too incomplete a picture – a woman performs as a *nuse* in both.

My use of the interviews is uneven. By that, I mean that I have engaged with the young women's interviews in more depth and have given them more attention in my text, quoting them more often than I quote the older interviewees. Reflecting back on the material I collected, I wish I had shifted the focus in the interviews with elderly and middle-aged women from their *nuse* stories to their roles as mothers-in-law and the interactions with their daughters-in-law, as it would have provided an interesting perspective on today's *nuse* experiences. I could not organize follow-up interviews from Canada with the older women who are less tech-savvy than their younger counterparts, thus I have to rely on my observations and occasional comments.

Twelve of my interviewees kindly provided me with photos and videos of themselves during their wedding celebrations or dressed in *nuse* outfits for festivities. Sometimes my interlocutors used them to illustrate their stories, sometimes we looked at them after the interview, and sometimes they sent them to me later. I was disappointed to find out that most of the women born in the 1940s, 1950s and even 1960s had neither photographs nor clothing nor jewelry from their *nuse* time. "No one took photographs back then," my interviewees born in the 1940s exclaimed. Some of the photographs and objects I hoped to see were lost when moving from one house to another, or in the war. Lila (b. 1963) had a video recording and photos from her wedding day, but they went up in flames with her home during the war. Other "keepsakes" were not seen as worth keeping. I was surprised to hear that Remzije (b. 1964) had recently burnt the white dress in which she got married in 1979. She thought that since no one would wear it



now, it would be better to get rid of it herself, instead of letting someone else dispose of it. Others' keepsakes were inaccessible, tucked away in attics. It now occurs to me that my position as an urban woman from a family of intellectuals had prompted my expectation that people cherish old objects and photographs related to their personal and the family history, an expectation that does not take into consideration the crowded houses with little furniture which many of my older interviewees inhabited.

I have replaced all the names of research participants with pseudonyms. When I mention a research participant, her year of birth follows in parentheses. More details about each interviewee's occupation, education, urban or rural residence, year of birth, engagement and marriage can be found in Appendices A and B. Appendix A also elaborates on the circumstances of the interview. People who appear with an initial for their first name were not among my research participants – they include relatives of the research participants as well as my own friends and family.

### ***Group conversations***

I deemed my topic safe enough, and thus, I once tried to recruit research participants without the help of my Albanian relatives. On a hot July day, I made two attempts to talk to the middle-aged and elderly women picnicking in groups on the lawn of a spa while waiting for their procedures. The women were reticent to talk in detail about their experiences of getting married some thirty-forty years earlier despite the absolute anonymity I promised – I did not even ask for their names or residence. This experience proved the limitations of brief fieldwork as well as my dependence on my in-laws whose support provided more assurance to participants than any informed consent form could ever do.

### ***Participant observation***

While in the field, I had the chance to attend an engagement feast and a wedding in my family circle, as well as the henna night of a bride-to-be whom I contacted through the venue's staff. My attendance at these festivities provided me with a wealth of impressions and embodied experiences. I also spent several hours observing interactions in a hairdresser's parlour and at a formal dress designer's shop. The designer, and especially, one of the seamstresses answered many questions and provided additional explanations about their work, the different types of dresses and

fabrics, the kinds of dresses best suited for different types of feasts. I also toured shops in Prizren and Ferizaj to inquire about the prices and countries of origin of bridal outfits and of the jewelry typically purchased for a bride. Some sellers and shop owners became wary and hostile the minute I told them I was doing research. I suspect that some did not believe my explanations and some may have thought my inquiries were part of a tax investigation. Others simply did not want to bother with someone who was not going to make a purchase.

## **Positionality**

This project and I have been maturing together since 2016, and during this time my attitudes towards and identification with the women I am writing about have changed. This shift was brought about largely by my marriage to a rural Albanian man, a son/brother/nephew/cousin/neighbour/friend to some of my interviewees. Unsurprisingly, this event, imminent at the time when I conceived of this thesis, motivates and influences it.

I am an ethnic Bulgarian, born and raised in an Orthodox Christian family in Sofia, Bulgaria's capital. I have also benefitted from advanced postsecondary studies. Thus, at least on the surface, I do not have much in common with the Albanian Muslim women who are the subjects of this study. Most grew up in villages of former Yugoslavia or independent Kosovo, had had few education opportunities, and had been through a war.

However, some circumstances facilitated the building of communication and affectional bridges between these women and me. Our shared womanhood has added some you-know-what-I-mean intimacy to our conversations. My postsecondary studies provided me with the opportunity to learn standard Albanian and gain extensive knowledge about Albanian culture, literature and history. My study-abroad experiences in and travel to Balkan and other post-socialist countries deepened my understanding of the present-day problems of the region and honed my cultural sensitivity. Lastly, my previous employment as a journalist covering economic news from Albania, Kosovo, and Macedonia, have also helped me contextualize my project in a larger socioeconomic framework. I hope that the bridges my Kosovo friends and I have built, my

anthropological training and prior knowledge, as well as my experience as a foreign *nuse*, will help me to tell a compassionate story.

Since I married in 2017, my in-laws have instructed me half-jokingly, half-seriously in the “traditional” duties of Albanian wives, daughters-/sisters-in-law. This coaching was premised on and informed by my foreignness and their uncertainty how much of it, if any, I was ready to adopt. Being part of an Albanian family has immersed me into the everyday life of rural Albanians in ways in which my previous academic visits to Kosovo and Albania or a limited fieldwork could have never done. I listened to stories about the past, watched Turkish soap operas with them, scolded and caressed their children/grandchildren, now my nephews and nieces, made small talk with their neighbours. I learned the exact place in the cupboard for the carefully wiped off tea glasses, vacuum-cleaned the crumbs after each meal just as they do, tossed grain to the hens and closed them in for the night. I visited other people’s homes where I was treated with all the minutiae of Albanian hospitality and then seen off with blessings. Thus, in the descriptions and analysis which follow, I combine others’ accounts and writings with my recollections and reflections of very particular embodied states related to my positionality.

Juggling between my identities of a married woman in Kosovo and a researcher has also had its downsides. At times I was too concerned with my own performance and bodily discomforts to notice what was going on around me. That was especially the case at the two celebrations which I attended primarily as a guest. Holding a camera while wearing the *nuse*’s Turkish trousers felt surprisingly confusing. Furthermore, the active involvement of my kin in my project blurred the boundaries between personal and research relationships. In the ensuing grey area, there were no clear-cut ethical guidelines beyond a common-sense notion of privacy and do-no-harm principle.

## **Lulije’s story on the edge of fiction**

I have chosen to present a fictionalized story of the wedding of a female character named Lulije, in a series of numbered episodes throughout this thesis. The genre of Lulije’s story escapes an easy definition. As it is not an exact representation of what I observed during my fieldwork in Kosovo, it is a work of fiction. However, it is a fictional account in which *the resemblance to actual events, locales or persons* is not at

all coincidental. On the contrary, the story is my conscious attempt to capture the zeitgeist of contemporary rural Kosovo by collecting chunks of local ordinariness. It is collaged from my perceptions and observations of everyday and ritual life in rural Kosovo during and prior to my fieldwork and is meant to be probable. It is also informed by my own, however incomplete, experience of being an Albanian *nuse*. I am indebted to other authors who have experimented with ethnographic fiction (Ghodsee 2011, 2017; Hamdy & Nye 2017; Hecht 2006). I also took the lead from Reineck (1991) who opens her text with a beautiful, fictional snippet about a *nuse* waking up for the first time in her new home, and from Gediminas Lankauskas who presented his material by way of composite characters in his book about Lithuanian weddings (2015).

I have written Lulije's story from the perspective of the proverbial fly on the wall, but a fly that dares to imagine what it is like to be Lulije. This ambiguous position reflects my own positionality as a well-meaning and surprised witness and a foreigner undergoing initiation into the life of an Albanian woman. The third-person account also turned out to be the most practical choice for describing crowded situations, material culture and feelings. 'Lulije' which derives from the Albanian word for 'flower', *lule*, is a generic name used for the bride in some wedding songs. It is only used in this context, never as a given name in real life. Lulije's husband has the name 'Ilir', an ideologically loaded name which alludes to Albanians' origin from the Illyrians. The details that are described suggest that Ilir's parents spent as much as 12,000 euros, making the wedding slightly more expensive than most of my interviewees' weddings. But as an only son in the family and a migrant worker, Ilir deserves a big wedding. Unlike Lulije and Ilir, most contemporary Kosovo couples do not celebrate every possible wedding ritual and feast, but rather select the ones that resonate with them and fit their budgets.

## **Previous writings**

In this section I outline the previous writings that deal with or mention the activities, behaviours and work expected of Albanian women in Kosovo and elsewhere, as well as Albanian marriage customs and wedding rituals. Since my research has a contemporary focus, I only sparingly employ the following literature throughout the text, mainly as a historical reference, to show the continuity of a practice or how it relates to other practices from the past. Nevertheless, these sources informed my writing and understanding of the issues at hand. I hope that my study contributes to this body of

literature with a nuanced account of what it means to get married in present-day Kosovo and how it looks and feels.

**Sources on the lives of Albanian women.** The lives of Kosovo Albanian women have remained in the outskirts of recent scholarly analysis. The last major works engaging in-depth both with Kosovo women's everyday experiences and their participation in rituals date from the Yugoslav period: the MA thesis of the Norwegian anthropologist and human-rights activist Berit Backer posthumously published as a book (2015 [1979]) and the doctoral research of US anthropologist, dancer and aid worker Janet Reineck (1991). Backer (2015 [1979]) explored household structure in the village of Isniq in western Kosovo, in the 1970s, whereas Reineck (1991) looked into the connection between labour migration to Western Europe and the propensity to conservatism in 1980s rural Opoja, southwestern Kosovo. Both authors aimed to give a holistic ethnographic account of people's lives in Isniq and Opoja, and thus, provided evocative descriptions of marriage practices, wedding rituals and everyday dynamics and an analysis of the expectations towards the behaviour and attire of a *nuse* in relation to the patriarchal, patrilocal, and patrilineal character of Kosovo Albanian society. More recently, there have been three local oral history initiatives – the *Kosovo Oral History Initiative* (Krasniqi, Krasniqi & Susuri), the project *Kosovo's Memory: the 100 confessions of 100 elders* (Gajraku & Canolli, in progress<sup>2</sup>, my translation of the title), and *Kosova Memory: Woman's Share of Inheritance* (Gajraku & Canolli 2017), all of them treasure troves for researchers aspiring to explore the everyday lives of men and women in Yugoslavia's Kosovo. The women included in the *Kosovo Oral History Initiative* are almost exclusively professionals or political activists, often of urban residence. While their stories are quite intriguing, they emphasize education, career, life in the cities of Yugoslav Kosovo, the political tensions of that time, and rarely touch upon marriage, weddings or housework. There was and continues to be a wide gap between Kosovo's urban and rural populations; in fact, Isabel Shtrohle (2016) who examines the inequalities between Kosovo's urban and rural regions, argues that a rural underclass emerged in Kosovo during the socialist period. The demographics and the topics of conversation of the other oral history project – *Kosovo's Memory: the 100 confessions of 100 elders* – comes closer to my work. This project's participants were born between 1918 and the end of the

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<sup>2</sup> Thanks to the representative of the project Gresa Maliqi for giving me access to this very valuable material which is yet to be published.

1930s and many of them talk about their marriages, families and their everyday housework. The third recent oral history project deals specifically with the inheritance rights of Kosovo women and how they often relinquished and continue to relinquish them in order to keep their good relationships with their brothers. The Kosovo sources described above directly or indirectly document Kosovo women's lives from the mid-20th century up until the last war in Kosovo (1998-1999) and show that at that time arranged marriages, patrilineal descent, paying a bride-price, patrilocal living arrangements, and a gendered division of labour were the norm, especially in rural areas.

These are not unique to Kosovo Albanians – Whitaker (1981) who writes about the position of women among Northern Albanians in neighbouring Albania, based on material collected before Enver Hoxha's socialist regime came to power in 1946, describes similar marriage practices and gender norms. Many writings on marriage, family and gender norms among Albanians refer to customary law (Backer 2015 [1979]; Reineck 1991; Whitaker 1981), of which the most widely known is the Kanun of Lekë Dukagjini (also called the Kanun – Gjeçovi 1989 [1933]), a collection of orally transmitted laws that were operational in Northern Albania from the 15th century. It was influential, especially because neither the Ottoman empire, nor the Albanian state could really establish authority in the mountainous region. This customary code provided guidance on many matters – property rights, Catholic church life, rules of hospitality, blood revenge and marriage. It defined the purpose of marriage as the addition of one more worker and children to the household (Gjeçovi 1989 [1933]: Article 11, Clause 28) and determined how it should be arranged and celebrated, and what the obligations of the spouses were. According to this misogynistic code, women had no right to interfere with the negotiations of their and their children's marriage (1989 [1933]: Article 12, Clause 31; Article 13, Clause 33); and once married they had numerous obligations – to uphold their husbands' honour, to respect the authority of their husbands, to carry out their household chores impeccably, to fulfil their “conjugal duties”, to raise the children and to make clothes for them; and few rights – to be provided for with food, clothes and shoes (1989 [1933]: Article 13, Clauses 32 and 33).

**Fictional representations.** Two novels, Naomi Hamill's *How to Be a Kosovan Bride* and Besim Statovci's *My Cat Yugoslavia*, both published in 2017 and both very emotive, weave into their narratives experiences of young women marrying in rural Kosovo – in 1980 and in the beginning of our century – including their arranged marriages, the

wedding festivities with all their glitter and intense emotions, and the subsequent life in their in-laws' homes with husbands, who in both novels, happen to be self-absorbed and violent.

**The wedding celebrations.** Reineck gives a detailed description of the stages of a wedding in Opoja – the agreement between the families with a special focus on its economic aspects (1991: 81-87), the henna night and the welcoming of the bride from the perspective of the marrying woman (1991: 92-96). Weddings and family formation are important to ethnographer Abaz Dojaka from Albania, but his heavily ideological writings fail to distinguish lived realities from the ideological goals and slogans of the socialist regime. In *Dasma shqiptare* [The Albanian Wedding] (1983) where he summarized his main ideas and the material on weddings and marriage practices available to him, he provided regional details about the rituals starting with the engagement arranged by a matchmaker without the knowledge of the bride and the groom through gift exchanges and to the customs ensuring good luck and male heirs. The customs, described by my interlocutors, resembled the ones from the Luma region in Northeastern Albania. Myftar Memia's writing reconstructs the traditional wedding rituals in the highlands of Northeastern Albania, in a similar manner (1962, 1981). These Albanian authors, interested particularly in the wedding rituals, mostly follow the tradition of historically-oriented ethnography aimed at reconstructing practices which seem frozen in the past, often from unclear sources, an approach contemporary anthropology shuns. Miaser Dibra's monograph (2004) about the wedding rituals in the Albanian city of Shkodra before 1944 belongs to the same tradition, but her account is somewhat more sensitive to the specific socioeconomic realities in which wedding celebrations took place. An interesting thought she offers, is that wedding festivities were a breather for the Shkodran women who led very isolated lives (2004: 43, 52). This is something that I also observed, albeit at another time and place. Arbnora Dushi (2009) who provides fascinating details on the ten-hour women-only festivities in the Kosovo city of Gjakova at which women would celebrate the birth of a boy, a wedding or a circumcision, also explains that for women such feasts were the only occasion to go out of their homes without a male escort. The guests were almost exclusively married women, Dushi explains, and not unlike my interviewees, the Gjakovan *nuse* invested a lot of time and money to look their best, changed outfits, danced in a particular, slow way and were praised by their mothers-in-law for it. The book *Engendering Song: Singing and*

*Subjectivity at Prespa Albanian Weddings* (1997) by US ethnomusicologist Jane C. Sugarman, based on her 1980s fieldwork among South Albanians in the Southwest of neighbouring North Macedonia and immigrant communities in North America, provides a detailed account of the wedding feasts in these communities.

**Gift and money exchanges.** According to the accounts of my interviewees, until at least the 1980s, fathers in Kosovo asked for money in exchange for their daughters. The money was meant to be invested in the bride's trousseau – *çeiz* or *pajë* and thus can be interpreted as 'indirect dowry' (Backer 2015 [1979]: 210, 1983: 56-57; Reineck 1991: 83-84; Hasluck 1933: 192; Goody 1973 introduced the concept 'indirect dowry'); in the first half of the 20th century the trousseau, prepared by the bride-to-be and her female relatives, included homemade clothes for the bride, bedding, decorative textiles and gifts for her in-laws. However, less well-off fathers often used some, or even most, of the money to feed their families, buy land or get their sons married (Fatime, b. 1962; Reineck 1991: 84-85; Hasluck 1933: 192). Several elderly interviewees described this practice with the expression *baba ka hangër pare*, literally 'Father ate money'. Some authors who wrote about the practice, regarded it as the equivalent to selling women (Hasluck 1933; Durham 1935; Dojaka 1983: 50-5) and so did some educated Kosovo Albanian women in the 1970s and 1980s (Backer 2015 [1979]: 259-260). My research participant Fatime (b. 1962) concurred with this view. In addition to that, the groom's family had to buy the bride gold jewelry and clothing items not produced in the home. Payments to the father of the bride – whether construed as bride-price or not – are a thing of the past now, and trousseaus, now consisting mostly of decorated towels and doilies, are also disappearing, but buying formal and everyday clothing and jewelry for the bride is still widely practiced and represents a significant expense, between a quarter and a half of all the wedding expenses (see Appendix C).

**The gendered division of labour.** In the past, Kosovo Albanian men and women, especially in large extended family households, had separate domains of labour and interaction. Both Reineck and Backer gave detailed accounts of the organization of work and life in rural Kosovo households (Reineck 1991: 55-59; Backer 2015 [1979]: 99-128; Backer 1983: 50-52), while British archeologist and classicist Margaret Hasluck provided a description of the complex household organization and the division of labour among the North Albanians in early-20th-century Albania (1954: 25-73). In brief, men went out for wage or agricultural work, women prepared food, cleaned the home, took care of the



children, and helped with some of the agricultural tasks. The master of the house – an elected elderly family member – allocated work to the men and made all the important decisions, whereas the mistress of the house – not necessarily the master’s wife – managed the women’s work. The home space reflected this segregation – there was a separate room with a separate entrance in which men sat and welcomed visitors while women brought food to the door. Some of the chores of a modern-day’s *nuse* originate in the old ways of household organization and the mother-in-law in a contemporary multigenerational home can assume a role similar to the mistress of the house in older times.

**The *nuse*’s liminality.** In the process of incorporation into her new family, a *nuse* carries out unpleasant tasks and lets others order her around (Backer 2015 [1979]: 143), but whether she can truly become part of her affinal family remains under question (Reineck 1991: 101-102). According to some authors, men regarded women as inherently problematic because they brought entanglement – loyalties to other families – and thus stood in the way of the ideal autonomy of the patrilineage (Shryock 1988). Women were “Trojan horses who have to be prevented to act out this potentiality” and that required their subordination (Backer 2015 [1979]: 112-113; 1983: 60-62). Thus, the activities and behaviours of a young married woman can be seen as an attempt to overcome her liminal situation and to establish as good a relationship with her affinal family as possible. Reineck touched upon the notion of performativity in a newly married woman’s everyday and ritual life (1991: 6, 11, 95-96); whereas Sugarman (1997) offers a convincing analysis of how gender and age hierarchies and norms are reified through orderly performance – of songs, small talk, and etiquette.

**Earlier references.** I searched for references to Albanian women and their way of life in writings from the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century when the lands inhabited by Albanians were part of the Ottoman empire. While that was more than a century ago, those sources are also important because many of my points of interest – marriage, gender roles, women’s caring labour – are perceived as “traditional” by Albanians and thus we might assume they were partially inherited from previous times. During that period, Albanians were visited by foreign travelers, politicians, missionaries, folklorists, anthropologists, and other scholars. According to their somewhat orientalizing writings, Albanian women of that time engaged in arduous labour in the household and in the fields (George Byron 1809 in Marchand 1982: 29-34 ; Manzour 1827: xxv-xxvi;

Skene 1849: 173-174; Wiet 1866; Tozer 1869: 207; Hassert 1897: 541-542; Siebertz 1910: 144-147; Durham 1909: 37, 41; and later Hasluck 1954: 25-26) and endured the despotic demeanor of their husbands and fathers often accompanied by severe beatings (George Byron 1809 in Marchand 1982: 29-34, Durham 1909: 28, 108-110; Durham 1928: 204). On a somewhat different note, female travelers were impressed by the urban brides' ostentatious attire and their extensive use of cosmetics which continued into married life (Karlova 1870: 171-173, Blunt 1878: 84, Garnett 1891: 220-221, 250, Durham 1909: 140).

## **An outline of the chapters to follow**

This text puts performance theory in dialogue with phenomenology, jumps from the contemporary to the historical and back, relies on sources ranging from interviews to autoethnographic accounts to YouTube videos and shifts from the words and concerns of fictional characters to those of real people. I hope that my collaging strategy will result in "saying more by juxtaposing multiple levels and styles of analysis" (Marcus 1998: 37), that it will show the nuanced, multifaceted and interconnected character of the people, practices, and situations, I set out to describe.

Lulije's story acts as the text's spinal cord, around which one theoretical and three ethnographic chapters are formed. Between the chapters there are intermissions consisting also of episodes from Lulije's story. For a timeline of the festivities, please consult Appendix D. Chapter 2 begins with a brief discussion of contemporary marriage practices and the shifts they have undergone. The chapter goes on to adopt concepts from performance and practice theory with which to conceptualize the *nuse* activities, looks and behaviours as practices or performances or a local variation of doing gender and family. I examine the collective character of the *nuse* practices and more specifically the teamwork, negotiations and display which they involve. I also pay attention to their embodied nature and the role of bridal material culture. I give plenty of examples in this chapter, and then expand on most of them in the following ethnographic chapters. Chapter 3 describes the clothes and gold jewelry which a *nuse* receives from her in-laws, the intense bodily sensations women experience when wearing them, the *nuse* "dress code" and the overall *nuse* appearance in detail. Chapter 4 looks into patrilocality, the organization of women's social milieus that it engenders, and sketches the relationship between a young married woman and her mother-in-law arguing that the

*nuse* practices are at least partially fueled by these relationships. Chapter 5 describes a recently married woman's duties in the new household, engages in a discussion of the embodied aspects of *hyzmet* or serving and contrasts her life at her in-laws' with her visits at her parental home.

## Chapter 2.

### Contextualizing and theorizing Lulije

#### The bride's word (Ep. 1)

*Please consult the characters' list and the glossary as needed.*

[At Ilir's, the groom's home.]

“You know that Ilir was seeing someone before he went off to Germany, right?” Mihane starts slowly, enjoying the effect these words produce on the five women from the *mahalla*, who have gathered in her sitting room for tea in a bleak December afternoon.

Earlier in the day, Lulije's two uncles have come and brought the *pesbqir*, the ritual towel, as a sign that Lulije's family agrees to her marriage to Ilir, Mihane's only son. Undoubtedly, the women from the *mahalla* saw the two men entering their home and are dying to know who they are and why they have come.

Behare and Safete, her two sisters-in-law, at once stop complaining about their high blood pressure. Flutura fixes her eyes on Mihane and sips from her tea forgetting that it is hot. Shqipe, an always tired mother of four pesky boys gives up on the fight with her youngest over the smartphone, so that she can have a couple of minutes of silence while he plays Pubg<sup>3</sup>. And Arta who is sitting on the edge of the couch smooths the folds of her purple dress with eyes cast down. She has married into the mahalla this summer and is uneasy showing her curiosity.

“Well, he was keeping it a secret for some time, and we did not really know who she was. And it turned out she was a niece of my sister Hatixhe...” Mihane continues.

“Wait, you mean Muhamet's daughter?” Behare asks. Having married into the mahalla some forty years ago, she knows everybody's relatives in great detail.

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<sup>3</sup> PlayerUnknown's Battlegrounds is an online multiplayer game, popular among Kosovo boys at the time of my fieldwork.

“No, no. Hatixhe’s second brother in-law, Arif. He has two sons and two daughters...”

Mihane starts explaining. “Well, the younger daughter, Lulije, the dancer...”

“A dancer?” Behare’s eyebrows fly high with surprise.

“I mean, she has been performing Albanian dances with a group of girls for six years or so. They sometimes dance at weddings,” Mihane says almost apologetically. “My sister says she is a fine young lady, and most importantly, very respectful” she adds hastily. “Today Arif and Naim came to bring the towel.”

“How old is she?”

“Do you have a picture of her?”

“When are they planning to get married?”

The women fire the questions at her.

“She is twenty. Ariona, could you maybe find a photo to show them?” Mihane turns to her teenage daughter.

Ariona swipes through the photos in Lulije’s Facebook profile. The photos reveal a slender brunette with high cheekbones. A photo shows a smiling Lulije in a folk costume. In another she blissfully kisses her blue-eyed nephew who is poking his tongue out. In yet another Lulije dressed up in a red dress and with straightened hair enjoys the company of her girlfriends in a coffeeshop in Prishtina. There are no photos with Ilir yet. “*Shumë e mirë nusja*” (The bride is very pleasant), Behare leans back on the couch.

“How did they meet?” Shqipe wants to know.

“Well, remember, last year we were invited to the wedding of Muhamet’s son. Not that we are close relatives, but my husband is friends with Muhamet; they have been working together in Slovenia for some time, you know. And it was such a big wedding, they had invited over 400 people.”

Her story is interrupted by the angry screams of Shqipe’s son who is mad about losing the game. “Ah, they killed me!” Shqipe clenches his arm and pulls the phone from his hands.

“I’ll tell your father how you behave; you’ll see!”

“And Ilir saw her there. I think she had a performance of some kind together with other girls... I mean, of course, he had seen her when they were kids, once or twice maybe,” Mihane continues trying to shout over the boy. “My sister made the contact, they went out for a coffee and liked each other, you know how these things happen nowadays...”

“I don’t want any more,” Safete tells Ariona who is about to pour her a third glass of tea.

“One more, Auntie Safete?”

“No, no, thank you. I cannot... the doctor said I should limit the sugar. *Zoti ju dhashtë bereqet* (May God give you abundance).” She turns to Mihane with an offended air. “Why didn’t you tell us earlier? There was no need to keep everything in such secrecy, Mihane”.

“Oh, Safete, please, don’t make such a fuss. Everything happened quite unexpectedly... Lulije’s father found out they were talking and insisted that the issue get settled as soon as Ilir comes back from Germany. Wait, I will show you the towel her family sent us today.”

Mihane comes back with a white towel wrapped in cellophane and the women inspect the letters of the inscription *Urime fejesa* (Congratulations on your engagement) embroidered in golden thread, the initials I and L, and the handmade lace.

“They bought it, but it is such a great handiwork,” Mihane says and turns to her daughter.

“Ariona, *çika jeme* (my daughter), could you cut the cake? No, no, Safete, you should really try it. It is from our *nuse*. She prepared it herself, they brought it today with the towel.”

Ariona puts a crystal plate with a small piece of chocolate cake and a fork in front of each of the women. This is when Ilir enters, coming back from his oldest uncle’s where he and his father have brought beer and cigarettes to break the news appropriately to the men who have also gathered for afternoon tea. The tall young man respectfully greets each woman and ruffles the boy’s hair.

“We have been talking about your *nuse*”, Mihane smiles lovingly at her son. *Djalë i hasretit*, the son she has so longed for... after four daughters.

The women praise his chosen one and her cake and want to know when he plans to get married. “Well, I will first need to procure the money” Ilir laughs. A shadow crosses Mihane’s face. She hates the thought of Ilir’s upcoming departure. In less than two weeks he

is leaving again for Germany where he has been working in his uncle's construction company since September.

"I don't think it will be this summer." Ilir says. "First, I would like to do some renovations at home". Ilir has put Shqipe's boy on his lap and has given him a tangerine. "If you listen to your mother, I will allow you to beat the *tupan* at my wedding," he said pinching his cheeks.

Arta who hasn't said a word during the entire visit beside the mandatory greetings in the beginning, stands up and asks Ariona to allow her to help with the dishes. "Don't worry, they are not many, sit, sit."

Seeing her guests off, Mihane asks them to come back the next evening for a modest dinner on the occasion of Ilir's engagement; the real feast is scheduled for the spring. Ariona packs some of the cake for her grandparents and a widowed aunt living next door. "*Selam* to grandma and grandpa! And to Auntie Bukurie!" she shouts after the silhouettes receding in the dark, each holding a pair of slippers.

## In the context of change

Forty or so years ago, arranged marriages were the norm in rural Kosovo (Backer 2015: 205-211, Reineck 1991: 81-83). In most cases, they were negotiated without the knowledge or consent of the future brides. Nevertheless, people used to call the towel (*peshqir*), which the bride's family gave the matchmaker as a sign that they had accepted the marriage proposal, "the bride's word". The *peshqir* – then often a regular hand towel – not only announced the bride's family favourable decision, but it also solidified it into a binding promise of one household to another. "[It was] like a document that one has 'caught' a bride,"<sup>4</sup> Fatime (b. 1962) elaborated. In contrast, today's young women, even when introduced through someone or pushed by their families to get engaged to their boyfriends, are seen and see themselves as having made their choice on their own.

"Years go by, but the tradition to send a *peshqir* does not change," Ardita (b. 1993) assures me. Yet, to Fatime (b. 1962) who belongs to a previous generation and

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<sup>4</sup> The phrase *me zanë nuse*, literally 'to catch a bride', used by the older generation, expresses the act of engagement from the groom's family perspective.

had an arranged marriage, the sending of the towel in the contemporary context is a sham: they are just doing it “as if” it is how it used to be, she says. Ardita’s words highlight a continuity between generations and between their marriage practices, Fatime’s opinion – a discontinuity. Indeed, much has changed about the way the *peshqir* is sent and its meanings, but as meaningless as the ritual of sending a towel might seem to some in the current context, young people’s insistence to carry on with it can be read as their invitation to the older generations to participate in this revised ritual.

I open the chapter with this shift in the meaning of the ritual towel to introduce a generational gap, the significance of which silently permeates my entire text. This semiotic shift illustrates the moving ground, on which contemporary Kosovo women must negotiate their roles in their weddings and marriages. And while present-day young women are not the first ones to navigate a generation gap, the current changes are, or at least are perceived to be, more abrupt than previous changes.

Many of my interlocutors pinpointed the last war (1998-1999), in which Kosovo gained its independence from Serbia, as a watershed in their lives. Since then, education and career have become normalized and even desirable paths for young women. Arranged marriages without the consent of the bride have disappeared. Tales of despotic uncles and fathers who do not allow young women to go out of the house or continue their schooling have become a thing of the past. Maybe achieving an independent state and the support of the West after years of being the marginalized Others in Yugoslavia (Drakulic 1999) has boosted their spirits, their desire for education and development. An interlocutor speculated that the change is related to the fact that now Kosovo Albanians have access to white-collar jobs previously occupied by Serbs. Maybe United Nations’ governance after the war, the work of the multitude of NGOs, and the contact with the diaspora living outside of the country have brought about some of these changes. The somewhat vague explanations go – people got educated or people traveled, “saw the world” and brought “civilization” back home – separate research is necessary to determine to what extent these are true. Furthermore, the wide introduction of new technologies, such as household appliances, and infrastructures like roads, but also phones or the internet, also came around during this time and made women’s (married) lives easier by lightening their housework burden and facilitating their contacts with and visits to their parental families. It is in this context that young women comply to or even enthusiastically embrace and adapt parts of the Albanian “tradition” to employ it



in building their relationships with their affinal kin and, especially, their husband's female relatives.

## **Current marriage practices**

In contrast to the older cohort, all my younger interviewees had the final say in deciding whom to marry. Their husbands were introduced to them by well-meaning relatives or friends, or they met them at school or online. Middle-aged and elderly people admit that it is for the better that nowadays their children and grandchildren get to choose their partners. However, they put up with their children's romantic relationships, only as long as they lead to marriage; they see romantic relationships as the "modern" way of creating a family. Motherhood is framed as every woman's calling and the greatest personal fulfilment. Many of my research participants would agree with Donjeta's (b. 1997) proclamation that children are the greatest legacy one can leave behind in one's short time on earth. Such a viewpoint means that engagement and marriage are not simply seen as landmarks in a developing relationship, but as the prerequisites to achieving what women believe is their most important role and purpose in life.

In rural Kosovo, a woman's premarital behaviour and choices are regarded as a reflection of her good or poor upbringing. At the time when my older and middle-aged interviewees married, it was expected that they would neither engage in premarital sex, nor communicate in any way with strangers (see Reineck 1991: 102-106). Today, young women negotiate less black-and-white premarital expectations. According to my Kosovo Albanian acquaintances, premarital sex has become more widely accepted, especially after the engagement. One of my interviewees, Hana (b. 1997), got pregnant during that period, with an earlier wedding as the only consequence. However, multiple relationships stain a young woman's and her family's reputation. Donjeta (b. 1997), told me that very soon after she had met S., her husband, she started the "where is this relationship going?" conversation. She told him that she does not want to spend time with him and then break up. "I am not this type of woman, to change [boyfriends]," Donjeta emphasized. The loss of her mother a year before they had met also influenced her to take extra precautions to safeguard her reputation: "I did not want people to say 'see, she broke up because she has no mother.'" She was afraid people would construe her failure as a lack of maternal care and guidance.

The parents of dating women are anxious that their boyfriends might abandon them (Donjeta, b. 1997) and sometimes push for an engagement or at least an agreement between the families for a future engagement. The latter type of relationship, about which it is said that the couple have a relationship *familjarisht* (adverb that signals that their families know about it and have agreed to it) is almost as binding as an actual engagement. When E.'s father found out about her relationship with A., he insisted that the matter get settled right away – in her case that meant that although she was just 16 years old, the two families were introduced to each other and agreed that the couple would get engaged in due time (which they did in the summer of 2019). In that context, hiding a romantic relationship from parents and relatives until ready to get engaged emerged as a common pattern – Erina (b. 1993) and Melodi (b. 1991), for example, kept their boyfriends-now-husbands secret for as long as two years.

Young people in rural Kosovo tend to marry early – both the median and the average age of first-time marriage among my youngest cohort of female interviewees was twenty-three<sup>5</sup>. Surely, the pressure from parents and in-laws plays a role in this practice: Melodi (b. 1991) who married at twenty-three shared that she would like to have delayed the wedding two more years so that she could complete her studies and find a job, but her fiancé's parents insisted that they get married. Many young Kosovo rural women postpone or give up their dreams for careers, once they get married and have children. Thus, Ardita (b. 1993) and Erza (b. 1995) who had made up their minds to pursue careers as a teacher and a hairdresser, respectively, declared to their future husbands that their relationship depended on whether or not they supported this decision, whereas Fjolla (b. 1990) and Erina (b. 1993) made sure they were nearing the end of their studies before they married, because they knew that marriage and a potential pregnancy could end or infinitely delay their career plans. One should keep in mind that young women negotiate marriage, gender roles and motherhood in juxtaposition with the experiences of their older relatives and in-laws who have been predominantly housewives and mothers, often of large families. Only two of the women in the older cohort of my participants, Ganimete (b. 1952) and Lila (b. 1963), had ever

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<sup>5</sup> I am inclined to believe that the average ages of 28 for women and 31 for men reported in the national statistics (ASK 2020-1) do not represent rural Kosovo realities, as it includes the urban population and is skewed by marriages registered later than contracted.

been formally employed; my middle-aged and elderly interviewees had between three and eight children.

## Framework

In what follows, I theorize the Kosovo *nuse* behaviours, activities and appearance. I start with the vaguer and universalizing notion of societal expectations and, based on performance and practice theories, develop a more nuanced interpretation of young married women's experiences.

### The *nuse* ideal

For some years after her marriage, a woman in rural Kosovo will be expected to display very particular behaviours and looks and engage in certain activities. It is this set of societal expectations that I tentatively call the *nuse* ideal. If a *nuse* lives with her in-laws, she will be responsible for washing the dishes and all the cleaning in and around the house, she will serve the food and clear the table, and welcome and wait on daily visitors. If she lives only with her husband and their children, most often than not she will be responsible for the entire housework and childcare both of which Kosovo society regards as the domain of women. A *nuse* is also expected to adopt a modest, restrained and respectful bodily comportment and manners, to groom herself, and to dress in formal dresses and "traditional" costumes when she attends weddings and other festivities organized by her husband's relatives.

Pressures to wear what is "right" for a *nuse* or stand "like a *nuse*" or not talk (back), because "you are a *nuse*", are not uncommon in rural Kosovo. Such phrases are part of an established discourse reproduced in married women's talk, in the interactions between a married woman and her in-laws, in songs and jokes on television and social media, in anonymous complaints in online forums, and in postings on social media. A more detailed analysis of this discourse would be enlightening, but in this study, I give priority to the description of practices and only occasionally refer to the discourse around them. When thinking of the forces that make a *nuse* slip into her room and don a more formal dress at the sight of a visitor, as an 'expectation', one quickly realizes that while sometimes the mother- or sister-in-law will verbalize this expectation, quite often they do not need to – the young woman knows what is expected of her. Note the passive form

here, it is an anonymous someone, everyone, society; it is a hegemonic discourse that women have internalized. Being aware of such expectations and anticipating them, young married women “orient to the fact that their activities are subject to comment”; they design their actions “with an eye to their accountability, that is, how they might look and how they might be characterized” (West & Zimmerman 1987: 136). Sandra Lee Bartky writes about the disciplining of female bodies to achieve the feminine ideal through diet, cosmetics, surgery, makeup and other beauty procedures, and notes that women find themselves under perpetual “surveillance from without as well as from within” (2002: 21) and also that “the disciplinarian is everyone and yet no one in particular” (1998: 36). Even if the discipline of women and their bodies is “institutionally unbound” (Bartky 1998: 36), a *nuse*’s failure to live up to the ideal, impacts her life in tangible ways most often creating tension between her and her in-laws. When Kadire’s (b. 1998) mother-in-law expresses discontent because Kadire’s religious beliefs prevent her from attending festivities and dressing up in revealing *nuse* outfits,<sup>6</sup> it emerges that rather than being optional, in fact, it is expected of every good *nuse* to accompany her mother-in-law at weddings and dress up in *nuse* attire.

Since it is the husband and his family who benefit from a *nuse*’s labour and her good behaviour, the *nuse* ideal can, after Raewyn Connell (1987: 183-188), be conceptualized as a local form of ‘emphasized femininity’, or a femininity that caters to the needs and desires of men (1987: 183). Emphasized femininity in Connell’s writing, exists in an interdependent, complementary relation to hegemonic masculinity and is complicit in its engendering. Most people I talked to, seemed to embed the *nuse* ideal in similar essentialized, binary femininity and masculinity and to favour a local variation of the model of the male breadwinner, and the female nurturer and homemaker.

However, the *nuse* ideal cannot be reduced to a form of primordial patriarchy. The contemporary *nuse* ideal is informed by various undercurrents of ideas and wider networks of meaning. Firstly, in an era of intensified communication with various ethnic others, the *nuse* ideal has accrued meanings as an ethnic marker and a simulacrum of

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<sup>6</sup> Pious Muslim women like Kadire have at their disposal formal clothing with glitter, beads and embroidery – specialized shops offer long dresses with a high neckline and long sleeves that do not emphasize women’s bodies, – but they look different from a typical *nuse*. In the end, what an observant Muslim woman like Kadire will wear and whether she will attend feasts depends on many factors including her interpretation of the religious texts and the pressure from her and her husband’s families.

Albanianness. Furthermore, the ideal and the discourses and practices associated with it are appealing not only because they claim a particular Albanian identity but also because they provide women with opportunities to enter a reversed spacetime of self-care, fun, and even restrained sensuality (reversed as in the rites of reversal formulated by Victor Turner 1969: 177-178). Thus, many young Kosovo women enjoy dressing up in *nuse* outfits and attending feasts.

An undertone of post-feminism, as defined by Angela McRobbie (2008), can be detected in the *nuse* ideal as well. McRobbie argues that many Western young women consider feminism unnecessary and cast it aside, oblivious to the ways in which patriarchy continues to constrain their lives. In the popular culture of the 1990s and the 2000s, feminism is being dismantled and replaced by faux-feminist messages branded as women's empowerment, McRobbie's argument continues. The ensuing made-over femininities incorporate taken for granted feminist achievements, such a sexual freedoms and economic independence, into a celebration of a middle-class, consumerist "girlishness". Feminist movements and discourses have never fully bloomed in Kosovo, especially in the rural areas, and thus had not had the chance to become mainstream and be taken for granted in quite the same way as in the West, and yet I discover some similarities with the tendencies described by McRobbie. More specifically, I find a touch of post-feminism in the tendency to paint fashion- and beauty-related consumer practices as celebration of womanhood, as well as in some accounts overemphasizing women's choice over ongoing gender inequalities – the choice to pursue education or not, to try juggling work and family or be stay-at-home mom, to engage in the *nuse* traditions wholeheartedly or in a piecemeal manner. Many Kosovo young women are aware that they have many more opportunities and liberties than their mothers and grandmothers ever had; hence, they, like their Western counterparts, do not deem that significant changes in their current situations are necessary. A woman in her mid- or late forties at the hairdresser's even opined that now women have taken over, an opinion also expressed by one of the elderly men featured in the documentary *The Lord of the House* (Bremer & Rizvanolli 2017): "There no longer is a lord of the house. The women took over" (*i zoti i shpisë - nuk ka tash, tash e kanë marrë granimi*). Patriarchy and the oppression of Kosovo women are seen as a residue, not as an ongoing concern, if you have *fat*, luck, your husband and in-laws will be good people and you will get along, if not..., well, those are some unfortunate but isolated cases of backwardness.

The impact of Islamic teachings on the expectations towards young married women in Kosovo is not entirely clear. On one hand, the *nuse* ideal seemed to Donjeta (b. 1997) to be in harmony with Islam. She believes that it is Islam that commands women to take care of their in-laws and the children. She also thinks that Islam obliges husbands to provide for their wives and she regards that as a privilege for women. On the other hand, Kadire (b. 1998), the only one among my younger interviewees who wears a *hijab*, strived for independence – she had a postsecondary degree, a driver’s licence and a burning desire to start working (which meanwhile she did). Kadire despises the subordination of women to their husband’s families and holds that life with in-laws inevitably leads to tense relationships with them. She sees anything she does for them not as her duty of a daughter-in-law, but as kindness she only owes them because of their age.

I am not obliged to serve even a glass of water to B.’s parents. Another thing is that one should respect them because they are elderly. And here they consider it as the *nuse*’s duty. “*Nusja* has to get up, she should work as much as I used to work, she should serve...” But she doesn’t have to, that is not required by our faith [...] All these customs, whatever they tell you, that they used to get up at 3 am, did all the housework and the cooking, these were the customs back then, and, if you ask my opinion, they were complete nonsense. (Kadire, b. 1998)

That the *nuse* duties were not commanded by Islam exhausted the subject for Kadire who structures her entire life in line with her understanding of Islam’s requirements – prays five times a day, extensively reads about Islamic teachings, avoids places with alcohol and music, wears *hijab* and modest clothing, and followed Islam’s recommendations for romantic relationships and contracting a marriage. It is important to specify that Kadire professes a new, “purified” form of Islam that has been imported from the Middle East to the Balkans in the last decades (Ghodsee 2009), whereas the majority of Kosovo Albanian women, including Donjeta, adhere to the more “traditional” Islam of their ancestors.

## **A local way of doing gender and family**

Connell maintains that “femininity and masculinity are not essences: they are ways of living certain relationships,” and urges that attempts at typologies be replaced by histories (1987:179). I also contend that if the *nuse* experience in rural Kosovo is framed as doing rather than being, as “doing” that calls “being” into existence, one can better

reflect on its effects as well as on the embodied, practical work, material culture and connections involved in becoming a woman. Thus, the behaviours, looks and activities in which women engage in their efforts to fulfil the *nuse* ideal can be thought of as a local way of doing gender and family or as practices/performances of gender/family. While Connell argues that emphasized femininity “is performed, and performed especially to men”, in the case of the *nuse* practices, the audience is expanded to include the husband’s kith and kin, and especially his female relatives. In fact, a *nuse*’s beautifying procedures, her outfits and jewelry have rarely anything to do with her husband’s preferences.

Candace West and Don H. Zimmerman describe gender as “an ongoing activity embedded in everyday interaction” and “a routine, methodical, recurrent accomplishment” (1987: 126, 130). Judith Butler’s notion of doing gender also emphasizes its recurring character; according to her, gender is produced in “the stylized repetition of acts” (1999 [1990]: 192). In her discussion of the desire for a white wedding in the US, Patricia Arend (2016) uses Pierre Bourdieu’s notion of habitus to explain how gender happens, how it is materialized / embodied (149). Based on her writing, gendered habitus can be defined as a set of self-producing and reinforcing dispositions inculcated in the body through everyday interactions. If in the context which Arend describes, part of what it means to “be” a woman is to socially consume and talk about white weddings (2016: 159), the same is true for serving tea and doing one’s makeup in Kosovo.

The shift to looking at family as doing rather than being is credited to David Morgan who developed the framework of family practices (1996, 2011–2012). Briefly, the merits of this approach to family are that it emphasizes a verb over a noun (and hence, active over passive and dynamic over static), it posits family back into the everyday and the regular (2011–2012: 1–2) and it acknowledges family’s fluidity. Relationships require work, Morgan writes, and invokes Bourdieu’s apt metaphor of official family genealogies as “abandoned roads on an old map” – irrelevant to the understanding of day-to-day practices (2011-2012: 2; Bourdieu 1977: 38).

To clarify, in many of the *nuse* practices, doing gender is inseparable from doing family. When a young married Kosovo woman bows her head, takes her mother-in-law’s hand, and draws it near her forehead, then her chin, and repeats this motion two more

times (the gesture *marrje e dorës*, literally, ‘taking the hand’) while her mother-in-law smiles, apparently content with this public signaling of respect, should a researcher define that as doing gender or doing family? In other words, is she doing it because she is a woman or because she is a daughter-in-law? The gesture is reserved for young married women, it is part of a plethora of embodied ways to show respect and deference towards a woman’s affinal female relatives. In the contemporary context, it is definitely gendered: men do not do it.<sup>7</sup> Other researchers have already noticed that doing family and doing gender often intersect with other practices. Morgan finds that often when thinking about other matters researchers “find [themselves] considering family relationships” (2011–2012: 4), while sociological analyses of the division of labour in North American families reveal how housework intertwines with doing gender (as in Sarah Berk’s studies cited by West & Zimmerman 1987: 143–144 and Brines 1994).

While I am aware that the words ‘doing’, ‘practices’, and ‘performances’ belong to different schools of thought, I use them interchangeably in my text. To my ear ‘performances’ has some pretense to it but falling back on Erving Goffman’s theater metaphor (1956) is useful to reflect on some aspects of the *nuse* experience. ‘Doing’ and ‘practices’, on the other hand, posit it firmly in the realm of the ordinary and the everyday.

### **The collective dimensions of the *nuse* practices**

As noticed by others as well – notably Weston 1993: 14 and Finch 2007: 76, – gender performance theory in its attempt to deconstruct gender and show its oppressive character reduces it to an individual identity and leaves out its relational component. Kath Weston reflects on how the lesbians attending a Prom Nite event dressed up in the hope to be invited to dance: “In her view, how she looked was inseparable from the response she hoped to receive” (Weston 1993: 14). In a very different context, Sonja Luehrmann explores how Russian provincial women who turn to an introduction agency with the hope to date and potentially marry Western men, engage in performances of

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<sup>7</sup> Sugarman does describes a Macedonian Albanian groom kissing the hand of his bride’s male and female relatives at his wedding in the 1980s (1997: 128, 294). In the past young people of both genders and all over the Balkans, including Albanians, used to kiss the hands of their elders as a sign of respect and my guess is that that is the origin of the *marrje e dorës* gesture. Hand-kissing of elders is still widely practiced in Turkey and was until recently common among Bulgarians.



'traditional' femininity on the agency's website. For example, their photographs are shot from above and feature their radiant smiles, demanding a response, be it a marriage proposal with the promise of stability or a vacation abroad (2004: 872). In line with such observations about the relational character of gender performances, I suggest that the *nuse* practices, in which Kosovo married women engage to different degrees, should be seen first and foremost as embedded in social situations. In other words, these performances shape and are shaped by women's relationships with others. I will outline three principles of the *nuse* practices which illustrate how they are socially embedded: negotiation, teamwork, and display. These three aspects of the *nuse* practices also reveal how multifaceted a *nuse*'s interactions with her in-laws are.

**Negotiation.** Young women's involvement in *nuse* performances can be seen as a way of negotiating their relationships with their new relatives after the wedding, especially if they move in with their in-laws. Negotiation means that the course of someone's action "emerges out of his or her interaction with other people" (Finch & Mason 1992: 59). Thinking about people's behaviour in terms of negotiation works better than attributing it to following rules or considering that it stems from a certain social position – such as woman, mother, in our case, *nuse* – which leaves them "with little room for manoeuvre" (1992: 59). In other words, negotiation is a more realistic account of the tensions between societal expectations and a person's agency, however problematic the premises of the latter concept might be, as Saba Mahmood's paper on the women's Mosque movement in Cairo shows (2001). Thus, Melodi's (b. 1991) accounts of dancing at festivities past the point of exhaustion for her mother-in-law's pleasure or wearing makeup she was not fond of but telling everyone she liked it because it was her sister-in-law who had applied it, could be seen as negotiation. Melodi tends not to speak up and rather lets others – her husband and his sisters – interfere on her behalf when her mother-in-law's requests become unreasonable. By remaining composed and dignified while making compromises, Melodi appears as someone who still manages the situation and not someone who blindly obeys her in-laws. Young Kosovo women have different means of negotiation ('strategies' sounds too intentional and planned out) – kind words, homemaking and dancing skills, submissive behaviour. They also negotiate from different positions: some are newcomers in their husbands' households and have to put up with other people's schedules, needs or tastes daily, others' negotiation efforts are limited to occasional visits at their parents-in-law's homes.

**Teamwork.** Women's affinal families actively participate in their *nuse* performances. For example, serving tea and coffee, which is a *nuse's* responsibility in her new home from day one, can be seen as a test of her skills and upbringing, but it becomes the performance of the entire family when people outside of the household are present. A new *nuse's* female in-laws teach her where the utensils are stored and how the guests take their tea and coffee. In the first days of her marriage, as well as when there are greater numbers of visitors or more distant relatives and acquaintances who do not frequently come to the home, a *nuse's* sisters-in-law might help her prepare and serve tea and coffee. The mother-in-law, who lets herself to be served and pampered in front of others, will often find a way to show her appreciation by uttering a praise or will at least not embarrass her daughter-in-law whatever grievances she might harbour against her. The retinue plays the king, or as Goffman aptly puts it, a team performance strives to "foster a given definition of the situation" (1956: 51). In the case of the *nuse* practices, the definition of the situation is a type of femininity and harmonious and thriving family relations. A respectful and diligent *nuse*, a benevolent mother-in-law, helpful sisters-in-law collaborate in the back and front regions of the performance, and the success of such performances is dependent on all of them (Goffman 1956: 50). Even the *nuse's* personal front – the more formal outfit, makeup and hairdo which she puts on when expecting guests – is sometimes a collaboration: women borrow each other's clothes, cosmetics and footwear, help each other dress or do their hair, and the mother-in-law and sisters-in-law often ask their *nuse* to wear something specific they find appropriate. Thus, while the attention falls on the *nuse* during the festivities or visits, she is not a star, but a representative of the family and its efforts. The team performances bring cohesion and familiarity among the team members, despite the hierarchies in the family which place a newly married woman at the bottom (Goffman 1956: 50-51). In a Western context, Bartky explains that the body rituals aimed at achieving the normative feminine ideal fosters female solidarity and are one of the reasons for the appeal of this type of femininity (2002: 23).

The situations I am describing are highly interactive – many performances happen at the same time with more than one team involved in them. Janet Finch retells a family situation in which an interviewee shares that she felt simultaneously as an actor and an audience (2007: 76). To my mind, this is the case in most if not all *nuse* practices. So, when there is a wedding or when the neighbours come to visit, both hosts

and guests relay messages about their own situations through team performances. Furthermore, team membership can change within a single conversation or event. Thus, a *nuse* attending a wedding, will not only work in a team with her in-laws but will also perform as a one-member team in front of them and at some point, she might even team with other women in the same position as her, other *nuse*, and they will perform as a group to everyone else present. My – albeit piecemeal – use of Goffman’s theory here helps to sketch this principle of collaboration, its aim and effects, to gain an additional layer of meaning about practices such as dressing up, which at first glance might be regarded as a purely personal matter guided only by the haphazard preferences of the dresser.

**Display.** Considering that I am already leaning on performance theory to frame the activities and behaviours of Kosovo *nuse*, the concept of display might appear redundant. But drawing on Finch (2007) and my own observations, I think that ‘display’ names an aspect of the *nuse* practices which is not present in all of them but is their frequent feature. Finch suggests that in times of change in a family such as the addition of a new member, there is a more intense need to demonstrate to a relevant audience that the interactions and activities in question constitute a family (2007: 72). Displaying one’s family gives it legitimacy, Finch continues (2007: 71), by doing so one shows not only who is part of the family, but also that the so-defined family works well.

In her preface, Reineck (1991) wrote about the incorporation of two women into the home of her hosts. I find her account telling, especially in regard to display:

The wedding brought two “foreign” women into our family, and with them great changes in lifestyle for all of us. Rooms were reassigned and newly furnished. [...] My jobs setting the table, clearing it, washing it, sweeping the rug, washing dishes, serving guests became the duty of the brides whose skill at these tasks was *evaluated at all times*. The early morning hours when only Feride and I had been awake was now the time for brides to *show* what they were made of, to *exhibit their willingness* to get up at dawn to wash down the pavement, polish everyone’s shoes and shine woodwork and enamel until they gleamed. Guests came often, necessitating a *constant readiness for hospitality and display*. All attention centered on the behavior of the brides, their appearance, propriety, and skill in performing symbolic duties. All household activities were subordinated to the projection of the “right” image to visitors [*emphasis added*] (1991: 6).

The tools of display are material, such as gifts or keepsakes, and discursive, for example, narratives (Finch: 2007). I would add that the body itself can become a tool of display through its gestures and the activities in which it engages. One can observe that in Kosovo – when a *nuse* lives with her in-laws, a situation which often creates tension, she and her mother-in-law sometimes engage in narratives of extreme closeness in front of others (“*lumja unë* (how lucky I am), we are as close as a daughter and a mother”) striving to demonstrate that this is a well-working arrangement. The abundance of gestures, food, gold, expenditures, characteristic of the wedding and the *nuse* performances afterwards, can also be interpreted as tools of display – as Reineck illustrates in the quotation above – they are aimed to be shown off and looked at, they are oriented towards an audience. The formulaic character of the building blocks of the performances is also directed towards the audience: the greeting everyone knows, the tea everyone drinks, the traditional costume everybody wears serve as a low barrier to participation and a gold standard of evaluation.

## **Bridal material culture**

The concept of display reveals an additional layer of meaning of the abundant bridal material culture. The message of an expensive gold set purchased for the bride becomes clearer – it is not just “Look what we bought!” as in a classic act of conspicuous consumption, but “Look what we bought for our bride, to welcome her into our family!” Anthropologists have long been fascinated by the power of gift exchange and the bonds it creates between givers and recipients (Van Gennep 1960 [1908]: 29; Mauss 2002 [1950]), but how much more binding is an exchange when it is a public display of a particular relationship intentionally curated and showcased to others?

The bridal attire and jewelry help produce the young woman as *nuse* by marking her, by separating her from all who are not *nuse* yet – unmarried women, from those who are no longer *nuse* – elderly women, from those who are *nuse* not here but elsewhere – the women related by blood to the family, and from those who can never be *nuse* – men. Thus, bestowing and wearing bridal attire effectively institutes the *nuse* status and is one of the most important parts of this rite of passage as performed nowadays. Furthermore, the display is not limited to the wedding – young married women are expected to reenact their status and make themselves recognizable as *nuse* by wearing their *nuse* clothes and jewelry for several years afterwards.

## A *nuse*'s body committed to enactment

“The body is a participant in generating social practice” (Connell & Messerschmidt 2005: 851), and also it is “the existential ground of culture” (Csordas 1990: 5). While both material objects and bodies participate in *nuse* practices, their connections to these performances are different. Material objects allow others to witness and evaluate the relationship they symbolize even when it is not actively performed, while the embodied performances are temporal and thus require constant or regular enactment. For example, the bridal jewelry which a *nuse* wears on festive occasions, reminds of the benevolence of her in-laws without the need for this benevolence to be constantly enacted through more gifts, whereas a *nuse* might want to repeat the gesture *marrje e dorës* once in a while, at strategic moments, in order to convey her respect. Thus, embodied performances require an ongoing commitment which material objects do not.

A young married woman who wants to demonstrate her commitment to her in-laws will make herself available to others, show ardour in fulfilling her tasks, and will train her body to excel in certain skills and behaviours. The first element of a *nuse*'s commitment – being available – is not only about being physically present to fulfil tasks such as to be at home to greet and serve visitors. It is also about demonstrating a particular mindfulness. A lot of it is memory work – when guests emerge on the doorstep for a second time, a *nuse* needs to remember whose husband is deceased, who got engaged recently and countless other family connections. The same holds true for everyone involved in the conversation, but for the *nuse* who is a newcomer and simultaneously a hostess, this is a lot of new information. Then, there come the personal minutiae such as who likes their coffee without sugar. Being available also means being attentive to the needs of everyone else, ready to help, willing to go beyond what is expected of her.

Zeal is something that emerged from my conversations with some of the elderly interviewees. They equated this ardour with perpetual movement and tirelessness with expressions such as “I never stopped” (*kurrë s'jam ndalë*), “I was not lazy” (*s'kam pritu*), “I did not know what is to be tired, nor to sit down” (*s'ditsha as m'u lodhë, as m'u ungjë*). My interviewees Zymrije (b. 1961) and Fatime (b. 1962) engaged in a lively interaction about how even today they do not feel comfortable to just sit around and drink their

coffee in their own homes. Their accounts implied that zeal was not only a laudable disposition of one's character but was constantly enacted through a (young) body. In women's accounts, their zeal was what distinguished them from other women and won them the love and respect of their in-laws. Eagerness can compensate for some of a *nuse's* clumsiness, lack of skills or experience, as zeal is the first step towards learning what she does not know. In fact, one of my elderly interviewees told me how her ardour and successful learning made her a favorite of her in-laws.

I knew neither my husband, nor anyone. Only God helped me and enlightened me. I did not know how to carry out my household chores, because I looked after the cows until I got married. [...] But I was willing to learn, I watched as my sister-in-law cooked and I learned. (Hanife, b. 1944)

Hanife had no children in the first seven years of her marriage, but she helped her sisters-in-law a lot with their chores and with childcare. "I did not drag my feet, I did not just walk, I always ran," Hanife reminisced. Her husband's uncle – her husband's parents had passed and the couple lived with the husband's uncles and their families – took her often to engagements and weddings, more often than the other *nuse* in the household. He often praised her in front of everyone; "Hanife came to us knowing nothing, learned everything, listens to us, never says no," she quoted him saying.

Many of the *nuse* practices, while appearing simple and unimportant, actually require a great deal of dexterity and skill in order to be performed efficiently and unobtrusively, or in other words, they are the result of habit and the inculcation of certain techniques of the body (Mauss 1973). I would describe some of the skills in question as habits of keeping order, instilled in young women from such an early age that they have become a second nature: only in hotels and retail stores had I seen clothes and bedsheets as carefully folded as in the closets of my sisters-in-law and they did not seem to mind vacuuming the crumbs after every meal. Some of these techniques of the body are about paying attention to miniscule details. An example is the serving of refreshments where, as I have been told, the direction towards which the grip of the coffee cup points or the thickness of the foam of the Turkish coffee send messages of a *nuse's* respect, skill and excellence. Besides attention to detail, a *nuse* has to learn to control her body and contain it within certain limits (as Bartky, 1998: 29-31 and 2002: 16, also observes in Western context). This requires the body's adaptation and discipline: any occurrences that expose the body as uncontrolled or uncontrollable, such as spilling

tea or dancing too energetically, should be avoided. Especially when under the gaze of outsiders to the family, the *nuse* walk and dance should be slow, her emotions must be under control and she is not to raise her voice.

The reflections offered above offer insights into the collective and yet embodied engendering of the marked category of *nuse* and the following three ethnographic chapters will give plenty of material to illustrate them.

## Intermission

### Rings tied together (Ep. 2)

[Five months later. An engagement feast celebrated in the yard of Ilir's home.]

Ilir clumsily puts on the ring on Lulije's delicate finger. At least twenty phone cameras follow his shaking sweaty hands. One of his nieces, a five-year old dressed in a cream puff dress, has brought the tray bearing two plain gold rings tied together with a red ribbon and a pair of small scissors. But she has forgotten to retreat after accomplishing her mission and stands nearby captivated by the *nuse's* sparkling dark red dress. "From this moment on, I will live only for you. Until my last breath, you will be the light of my eyes." Gjyste Vulaj's melodramatic song brings Lulije's and Ilir's mothers to tears.

Lulije smiles at Ilir reassuringly and slips the ring on his finger, his father cuts the red ribbon and the couple raise their hands for everyone to see their shimmering rings. "With this ring I promise you that I will never let you go," the final chords of the song seal the moment. Ilir lays a shy kiss on Lulije's forehead. Applause from more than a hundred enthusiastic relatives erupts in the night.

Then under the sounds of a ballad glorifying eternal love, Ilir takes Lulije by the hand and leads her in a waltz. The zircon stones on her big earrings cast stars and rainbows on her white skin. Ilir's eyes finally find in their glimmering a refuge from all the well-wishing looks and intense emotions.



## Chapter 3.

### “Who bought you the golden vest, Lulije?”<sup>8</sup>

Bizarre and glittering, her many dingle-dangles forced her to sit stiff and still like a Byzantine ikon, and her pallid face and dead black hair gave decorative effect to the blaze of gold and colour.

(Durham 1909: 140)

In this chapter, I turn to the bridal gifts that initiate the relationship between a woman and her in-laws, as well as the dressing up practices, which a *nuse* adopts in her married life, as recounted by several of my interviewees and as I observed in celebrations attended or watched on video. After a description of the bridal outfits and jewelry and their economic meanings, I outline the *nuse* dress code. Then, I briefly explore dressing up as a collective endeavour and an opportunity for the *nuse* to bond with her female in-laws. Next, I touch upon the bodily pains and discomforts which wearing the bridal regalia involves and, finally, I reflect on the ostentatious looks which Kosovo *nuse* tend to choose when dressing up.

### Bridal shopping in Prizren (Ep. 3)

[More than a year after the engagement and three months before the wedding. In a bridal store in Prizren, one of Kosovo’s most popular destinations for bridal outfits and accessories.]

At least four reflections of a very bulky and desperate Lulije are looking back at her from the multiple mirrors of the bridal store in Prizren. Her future sister-in-law, Qëndresa, is enthralled by the white ball gown, her mother-in-law to be also insists that she looks lovely,

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<sup>8</sup> This title is borrowed from the lyrics of a wedding song “*Kush ta blejti orën e dorës*” (Who bought you the wristwatch). A girlfriend of the bride asks her who bought her the wristwatch, the golden vest, the striped dress, and for each item the bride replies that a man from a different location – Kosovo, Gostivar (city in North Macedonia), Albania – bought it, thus delineating the major Albanian territories and their common cultural heritage.

but Lulije herself finds the multiple tulle layers of the full skirt simply detestable. And the strapless bodice looks ridiculously hollow around the bust.

“You will wear a push up bra and it will be fine,” Qëndresa says, her eyes following Lulije’s attempts to adjust the bodice. “My sweet sister-in-law, you look like a doll.”

“I don’t know...,” Lulije says. It has been a long day of shopping. She finds some of the gold jewelry they have ended up buying way too extravagant, one of the dresses has so many layers of tulle and shiny stones that it is really heavy, and another one is decorated with feathers, the latest fashion that Lulije is not that fond of. She did not say a word, though. Ilir had asked her to respect his mother’s wishes in such things. “You know, since she has no other sons, she would really enjoy dressing you as a bride.”

The salesgirl cheerfully announces that this is one of the most popular styles these days, it costs 550 euros and that the store manager is willing to give them a discount of 50 euros. Qëndresa flies back to share the news with her mother who is exploring the clutch bags shining in different shades of gold and silver.

“I don’t know,” Lulije repeats. She does not want to seem picky, disrespectful or ungrateful, but she fears that the pile of dresses in the fitting room somehow cast her in such a light, even though most of them were chosen by her future in-laws.

Mihane looks up to her future daughter-in-law’s face in the mirror. Lulije’s furrowed eyebrows are trying to contain her disappointment and annoyance from overflowing. “Lulije,” Mihane says mildly, “maybe you don’t like this dress that much, after all? Maybe we should keep looking?”

Two hours later they are sitting in a coffee shop waiting for Ilir’s father to come and drive them home. The muezzin calls for the afternoon prayer.

“Oh, my feet are hurting,” Qëndresa says stretching out her feet in high-heeled sandals.

The shopping yielded three formal dresses, two gold jewelry sets and several rings, and a white wedding dress. To Qëndresa’s surprise, Lulije chose a dress with a simple skirt and scarce lace decorations. “In this one I can dance more freely,” Lulije has said fending off Qëndresa’s critical stare. “I guess so...” Qëndresa has shrugged her shoulders. Next week,

the women plan to go out for the more traditional bridal outfits – the *dimi* (Turkish trousers), *jelek* (short vest) and *dallam* (long coat), and maybe one or two more dresses.

“You know, when I was young, they just brought us the clothes, the gold, everything,” Mihane muses stirring the foam of her small macchiato. “My wedding dress... it was fine, and it fitted nicely. But... I don’t know ...”

Qëndresa is on the phone with her mother-in-law. Qëndresa’s toddler daughter is up from her afternoon nap and misbehaving. “I think you chose a beautiful dress, Lulije,” Mihane continues bending over to Lulije. “You shouldn’t mind Qëndresa, she is just a little bit... too outspoken”.

Lulije asks the waiter for the Wi-Fi password and sends a photo of the gold jewelry to Ilir.

“Is this how you are wasting my hard-earned money?” he jokes and sends back hearts and laughing emojis.

## **Dressed up for a new life**

Several months before the wedding, the date is set and shortly thereafter the preparations for the big day start. The groom’s family is expected to bestow the bride with gold jewelry and to purchase not only a white wedding dress, but an entire wardrobe of formal and casual clothing for her. There are several formal outfits reserved almost exclusively for young married women – long evening gowns and “traditional” outfits consisting of Turkish trousers<sup>9</sup> – the *dimi* made of 12 meters (artificial) silk / lace and either a short sleeveless vest (*jelek*) or a long elaborately embroidered coat (*dallam*) (see the different types of outfits in Images 1, 4, 10, 11, 12 in Appendix E).

A bride ought to start her new life equipped with everything new, Nazmije (b. 1993) explained and likened it to the birth of a child for whom the parents also buy an entire wardrobe of new clothes. Custom requires that the woman leaves her maiden clothes at her parental home, but some of my young interviewees told me they took them little by little afterwards when visiting their parents. Even in the cases when women

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<sup>9</sup> In the recent past a more modest model of Turkish trousers – the *kule* – were an everyday clothing item. Rifadije, b. 1942, and Hanife, b. 1944, met me wearing them and told me they never transitioned to pants and skirts.

get married without a large celebration, their in-laws will do their best to equip them with one or two formal outfits, because young married women dress up in *nuse* clothing when they attend circumcisions, engagements, or wedding celebrations, as well as for Eid, the festival of breaking the Ramadan fast. At a minimum, the groom's family is expected to buy one outfit with *dimi* and a *jelek*, several dresses, and a set of gold jewelry. According to my calculations, based on the prices in the bridal stores I visited during my fieldwork, if one chooses cheaper clothing (*dimi* and *jelek* set for 250-300 euros, formal dresses for 100-200 euros), a more modest gold set for about 800 euros, and borrows the white dress, one should be able to equip a bride with the bare minimum for about 2,000 euros<sup>10</sup> This calculation concurs with the estimations of the reporters from T7 (2020). However, it may be an underestimation – Rinesa (b. 1992) said that for a low-key 7,000-euro wedding about 4,000 euros alone would be spent on the bridal attire and jewelry.

The bride's own family also bestows her with jewelry and passes family heirlooms on to her, but these gifts are less obligatory (see Reineck 1991: 85-86). Sometimes, when the in-laws have modest financial means, parental gifts can balance out the situation and provide some of the desired bridal glamour, as in the case of Rinesa (b. 1992) whose husband invested his limited finances to renovate their future home and thus could not put aside too much for her bridal outfits and jewelry, but as an only daughter she received from her parents a dress, a ring and a *lira* (gold coin<sup>11</sup>) which had belonged to her mother, and her parents also bought her most expensive bridal outfit – the long embroidered coat (*dallam*).

Previously, the bride was not involved in choosing the bridal clothing – this was the case with all my elderly and middle-aged interlocutors whose bridal outfits and jewelry were delivered to their parental homes by the groom's male relatives. Nowadays, the bride-to-be goes shopping with her future mother-in-law and/or sister(s)-in-law which surely provides a bonding experience between them but can also be riddled with

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<sup>10</sup> According to national statistics, the average net monthly salary was 430 euros in 2019 (ASK 2020-2: 9).

<sup>11</sup> Gold coin replicas of the old *lira* which was in use in the Ottoman Empire until the 1920s. They are made of 22-24-carat gold. The coins which remain in use nowadays are the 5-lira coin (with a price of 1425 euros each in the summer of 2019), 1-lira coin (285 euros), and ¼-lira coin (70 euros). In Turkey, the same Ottoman gold coins are a customary gift on the occasion of a wedding, a child's birth, or a boy's circumcision, alongside a second type of coins featuring Atatürk's profile (personal communication with Ece Arslan). See Image 12 in Appendix E.

tension. A bridal dress designer told me that women now get to choose their outfits and at least at her shop no one purchases anything without asking the bride-to-be whether she likes it. That proved to be the case for the youngest cohort of my interviewees, who reported that they chose their bridal regalia largely themselves. Liria (b. 1990) said that her mother- and sister-in-law asked her opinion about every single piece of clothing and jewelry they wanted to buy her and even about the colour of the bedspread and curtains in the house that was being renovated. Still other brides-to-be showed deference to their in-laws and were willing to please them by letting them choose some, most or all of the outfits or by letting go of some of their desires: “They chose all the dresses. I told them: ‘I came only to make sure they would fit, choose them according to your taste’. [...] After all they are the ones paying for the dresses and M.’s mother is very passionate about that kind of stuff. She prefers certain colours, some very specific things. And I told her: ‘I am leaving it up to you’,” Melodi (b. 1991) told me. Melodi’s mother-in-law is not the only one with very particular tastes: Linda (b. 1996) told me with an air of indifference that her mother-in-law enjoys all the bridal fuss and Linda let her choose everything, she did not even care to accompany her.

The wedding festivities give plenty of opportunities to showcase the clothing a bride received from her in-laws, so much so that nowadays the henna night celebration, attended almost exclusively by women, centres around the bride changing outfits and the henna ceremony might not even take place. Usually, the bride-to-be wears a formal dress for her engagement. Then, on her henna night, she changes several outfits, starting with the *dimi* and *jelek* (the Turkish trousers and the short sleeveless vest), next a *dallam* (the long decorative coat) and then the formal dresses. On her wedding day, the bride leaves her parental home in a white wedding dress and will wear it at the wedding banquet as well. On the morning of the next day, when women gather to sing and dance, she wears *dimi* and a *jelek*, or a *dallam*, and will then change into her most elaborate dress when serving tea for the first time as a *nuse*.

## **Getting dressed for henna night (Ep. 4)**

[A Friday two months later. In a small restaurant in the outskirts of the small town nearest to Lulije’s village. The henna night celebration is organized by Lulije’s family.]

A small storeroom of the restaurant has been turned into a dressing room so that the young married women could change into their outfits during wedding and circumcision celebrations. Kumrije, Lulije's paternal aunt, puts a plastic bag on Lulije's head, so that her hairdo won't be ruined while changing clothes, and her makeup won't leave marks on the white shirt. "My daughter-in-law taught me this trick," she says and slowly slips Lulije's head through the opening of the shirt.

"Did you go to the bathroom, sweetie?" the aunt's deft hands quickly find the holes for the feet in the sea of silk of the *dimi*. Lulije nods. The aunt ties the rich baggy trousers at her waist. "Is it too tight maybe? It needs to be tight, otherwise it won't look good." Kumrije arranges the twelve meters of translucent cloth so that its folds are evenly distributed around Lulije's hips. The large lace flowers of the underskirt show through.

The music blasts behind the door that leads to the hall of the restaurant where the guests have almost assembled.

Lulije's niece, six-year-old Era, pokes her head through the door frame. "Auntie Kumrije, please let me in. I won't touch anything, I promise," she begs. The aunt who is busy fastening Lulije's sleeveless vest with a brooch, mutters something which the girl takes as yes. For a couple of minutes, the child silently marvels at Lulije's intricate updo with a *tasfes*, a shiny hair decoration, above her left ear, her lips painted red, her snow-white *dimi*, and the many flowers of golden thread embroidered on her vest.

The aunt is now smoothing the shirt's sleeve cuffs and collar made of stiff lace. With a jealous sigh, Era takes a lip balm from her pink child's handbag, puts some on her lips and strengthens the folds of her own dress. She sneaks a peek into the open jewelry box on the chair. "Wow," she whispers. "Lulije, you have more gold than auntie Miranda," she decides.

"Auntie, what is she going to wear next?" the child asks "The *dallam*, right? Because Auntie Miranda when she was getting married, first wore *dimi* and *jelek* and then *dallam* and then..."

"Yes, yes", the aunt replies briskly. She is now absorbed in fastening the small clasp of the bracelet of the gold set that Lulije's in-laws have bought for her. She has already adorned Lulije with the filigree belt, as well as the necklace and earrings from the set. Lulije hesitantly looks at her hands decorated with rings of different sizes and shapes – her plain engagement

ring on her left ring finger, the small ring with a red stone she has chosen herself on the right one, and the two large rings on her index fingers.

The aunt is about to take the last piece of jewelry from the box - a fringe necklace. "Auntie, maybe it will be too much?" Lulije ventures to say. "Of course not! You should have seen me as a bride. My entire chest was covered in gold."

"What a relief that I am used to high heels," Lulije relishes her new 12 cm high heels. "A school friend of mine sprained her ankle on her wedding, because she had never worn such shoes as a girl," she giggles and slips into the red velvet shoes matching the dark red of the vest.

Kumrije fixes a curl here, pulls a thread there and makes sure that the two legs of the *dimi* are symmetrical. "You look absolutely gorgeous!" she exclaims very pleased with this masterpiece of silk and gold. "Go, find your grandma and tell her that Lulije is ready," Kumrije instructs the girl.

*K'qyrni shoqe, çka ka rritur nana...* (Look, oh friends, whom Mother has raised.) The DJ is playing the song which announces Lulije's solemn entrance into the hall where a hundred people, mostly Lulije's female kin and friends, await her. The proud parents lead Lulije into the room and Lulije feels her mother's hand trembling.

Lulije lifts her hands and they start a dance of their own, rotating slowly in the wrists, showing off the rings and the perfect manicure and swinging a handkerchief decorated with beads. Her hips are swaying in the rhythm of the music while she makes small steps approaching the crescent of aunts, cousins, siblings and school friends enthusiastically clapping their hands and moving their bodies anticipating joining her in her dance.

*Edhe sonte o bajrak nër çika.* (Tonight, for the last time she is the most distinguished among the young women, lit. 'like a flag among the girls'). Later Lulije would tell Ilir that at this moment while she feared tripping over the *dimi* she also thought about her mother's and grandmother's weddings, about their solemn *dimi*, their gold, and their eyes cast down.

## The bridal gold: meanings and uses

I hear a jingle from under Kadire's hijab. She takes out the gold coin, a Turkish *lira*, and shows it to me. It belonged to her mother-in-law when she was *nuse*, whereas the necklace on which it is hanging is a gift from her mother. "I like it a lot and I never take it off. Even though no one can see it, I like wearing it," she says. The young woman, the only one among my younger interviewees wearing a *hijab*, carefully enumerates all the gold gifts she received on the occasion of her marriage a few months earlier. Kadire said she would like to have more gold and her husband has mentioned that he would buy her some in the future, once they are better off. She talked about the bridal gold as an asset that could be sold if need be. In a follow-up conversation, she clarified the kind of situations in which she would be willing to sell her gold. "If God would try us with an illness the treatment of which would require a lot of money, I would sell the gold, or if it gets so bad that we cannot afford to send our children to school or buy them clothes." Recently married women are expected to dress up and wear their gold jewelry on festive occasions (see Image 12) which means that selling it is not on women's minds at least in the first years of their marriage. Kadire, in contrast, as a pious Muslim, defies the tradition of dressing up and hence does not see gold primarily as adornment and appreciates its practical uses.

In Kosovo, seemingly from times immemorial, the groom's family has been purchasing gold jewelry for the bride. Gold jewelry is the most valuable gift that a bride will receive during the wedding celebrations. Dresses do not fetch much money if resold and cash gifts are usually spent by the couple together. Nowadays, the groom and his parents usually buy a gold jewelry set and several separate pieces such as rings for the bride. My interviewees called this gold bought by their in-laws and/or future husband in fulfilment of the custom, *dukati*, meaning 'gold'. In addition, the bride receives more gold – rings, coins, bracelets, as well as money from her in-laws and other relatives during and after the feasts. These gifts were referred to as *bakshishe* by my research participants, a word that also means 'tip'.

The practice of bestowing the bride with gold in Kosovo fits the description of *mahr* as known in English-language literature: a gift which under Islamic law the groom is obliged to give the bride before marriage (Mir-Hosseini 2004: 424). Some Islamic jurists have treated *mahr* as "the price/compensation the man pays for the exclusive



right to the sexual and productive faculties of a woman”, while others see it as an expression of respect to her (Mir-Hosseini 2004: 424). None of my interlocutors mentioned this term in the interviews, and my mother-in-law had not heard of it. In our follow-up written conversation Kadire (b. 1998) said that it is known among those who are committed Muslims (*fetarë*), but not so much among others (her mother had not heard of it either). She explained that before a couple get engaged, before they have had any type of intimate contact, the woman has the right to request a *mehër* (the spelling Kadire used) of any value; she could decide that the bridal gold is her *mehër*, or even a car or a house. Kadire asked her future husband to buy her a ring and pay for her driving lessons. Unlike Kadire, most of my interlocutors regarded the gold gifts as customary, just what Albanians do, and did not talk about them in terms of property, security, or as a religious requirement. It seems that Kadire’s conceptualization of the bridal gold as a woman’s property and security, or as *mehër*, is integrated into a religious notion of marriage framed in terms of agreement, partnership, consent, rights, and obligations.

While Kadire said about both the bridal gold and *mehër* that they belong to the woman, the latter “without any discussion”, I am unsure whether a woman would take the gold with her in case of divorce or separation. My understanding is that if the elders and the families regard the woman as the guilty party, they might think she is not entitled to it. I have no data to confirm that, but Reineck formulates the same principle for the 1980s (1991: 53). Rinesa (b. 1992) – who had gone through a divorce – put the issue in a different perspective: “I did not even want to discuss that [*whether or not to take the gold*]” she told me in our follow-up conversation and expressed her contempt for “the mentalities of the old days” when, according to her, some women would insist on taking the bridal gold with them when separating from their husbands. To her, to do so would have been shameful – “I did not marry for the gold”, she declared. Rinesa’s reaction reminds me of women’s reluctance to ask for their share in their parents’ property so that their brothers and other relatives would not perceive them as greedy and self-interested, but it might be her way of saying that she is an independent woman or that she does not want to have anything to do with her ex-husband and his family. Of course, it is also possible that her previous in-laws prevented her from taking the gold with her, but she reframed it as her own decision to make herself feel better about the situation.

One day I ran across the following Albanian meme in Twitter. A speech balloon coming from a non-Albanian woman wearing a miniature gold pendant: “This is a gift very dear to my heart, because it is from my husband”. The Albanian bride on the next picture, covered in gold complains: “The idiot has not purchased even half of what he had to.” This is not a widely shared and known meme. Still, it suggests that some Albanians disapprove of the tradition to buy the bride a lot of gold and also blame it on women’s greed that the tradition continues. An association between women’s desires for large amounts of gold jewelry and their lack of emancipation and education seems to have been around at least since the time when Reineck was doing her fieldwork. One of her male interviewees told her that “for a cultured woman, you would need only a small necklace, a pair of earrings, a ring and a watch” (1991: 88). The meme from Twitter adds new layers to this interviewee’s mental connections between backwardness and bridal gold – according to the meme’s anonymous author (just as in folklore), desiring gold is antithetical to love and signals a vulgar lack of culture and refinement. Such attitudes also mean that while brides are entitled to some gold jewelry, they are discouraged from showing interest in or attachment to it (hence Rinesa’s reaction). The following incident also illustrates that. Once, while engaging in a somewhat clichéd conversation with my hosts about the monstrous wedding expenses, a woman, the married daughter of the family we were visiting, somehow hastily and out-of-context retorted that she does not even wear the gold she has received from her in-laws. I was not sure what to make of that comment, but now I think that by displaying her indifference towards the gold she wanted to make sure that any eventual criticisms do not fall on her; she wanted to depart from the stereotype of the greedy bride so well illustrated in the meme discussed above. On another occasion, a young married woman who came for a fitting of her dresses for her brother’s wedding to the designer’s shop I visited as part of my fieldwork, nonchalantly declared that her mother-in-law insisted buying her gold jewelry for 5,000 euros. “It is up to you to wear it or not”, the mother-in-law had told her. The young woman had a highly respected position as a financial auditor with the police and a husband whom the seamstresses lovingly defined as “*demokrat*”, used in local parlance to denote progressive men who treat their women well, see them as equals and let them have a job or dress immodestly if it pleases them. The disinterest of this woman in her mother-in-law’s whim to buy her expensive jewelry underlined her independence as a modern woman who neither needs, nor cares about backward traditions but is gracious enough to accept her mother-in-law’s generous gift.

Even though gold is universally one of the safest investments because its price keeps relatively stable over time, gold gifts rarely advance the financial security or economic independence of Kosovo rural women. The gold is intended to be worn as bridal regalia or used for family-related needs and not so much to be kept or invested in personal undertakings. Most of my middle-aged and elderly interviewees did not have much gold jewelry to show me because they had either already passed it on to their daughters and daughters-in-law or sold it or lost it long ago.

The cases of intentional investment in a family endeavour as in the case of the mother of hairdresser F., who sold her five-lira coin, to buy the trailer in which F. and her sister served their first customers, are rare. Most often the decision what to do with the gold was not entirely in women's hands. Necessity and a sense of duty compelled them to sacrifice it so that the family could weather a difficult situation. Little by little, Fatime's (b. 1962) husband, Z., exchanged all her gold – four *liras*, bracelets, and rings – to make ends meet. Once he bought a cow, she did not remember what he did with the rest. If she ever felt any resentment about her husband selling her gold, it was overshadowed by her affection for him. But, apparently, he felt bad that he had stripped her of her gold because he promised, and eventually made good on his promise, to buy her a pair of gold earrings. "And since the day he himself clasped them on my ears at the gold shop, I never took them off," widowed Fatime concluded with a wistful undertone. Another example is the 2014-2015 emigration wave, when local media reported that families sold their women's gold jewelry to buy one-way tickets to Germany where they hoped to find a better life (Klan Kosova 2015). As the Albanian proverb sums it up: gold is to be bought for pleasure and sold at time of need (*Ari blihet për qejf dhe shitet për zor/hall*).

The gold also circulates among women. Being beyond their *nuse* time, middle-aged women with grown children no longer need the gold for personal adornment, so they often distribute it among their daughters, daughters-in-law and, sometimes, granddaughters and nieces. Hanife (b. 1944) literally took her own jewelry off her neck so that she could equip her first daughter-in-law with bridal jewelry; she had to, because her husband had passed away and her son, the groom, was unemployed. The custom that gave gold to these women when they got married often took it away from them when their children married, as if at weddings mature women hand the baton to young women to continue the patriline and become the home's new ritual representative. Many of my younger interviewees mentioned they had received gold coins from their mothers,

mothers-in-laws, grandmothers, and aunts, in fact some interviewees said that it is the custom brides to receive a gold coin from their mothers-in-law. When I talk about heirlooms, readers should not imagine an antique piece that belonged to somebody's great-grandmother. Many middle-aged and elderly women told me (sometimes with regret) that they had exchanged their original gold jewelry for other styles that were more fashionable.

## **Nuse dress code**

“Traditional” outfits (*dimi* and *jelek* or *dallam*) and formal dresses are worn according to an elaborate dress code. The practices vary from village to village and are shaped by personal preferences, tastes, and beliefs, but the main strokes are as follows. After the wedding, when attending a joyous celebration among her in-laws, a *nuse* again wears her bridal clothes: outfits with Turkish trousers at a henna night, a *dita e grave* feast or when participating in the taking of the bride; formal dresses at restaurant banquets. Dressing up in bridal attire – except for the white wedding gown – continues for years – five, ten, fifteen, even twenty – it depends on the region, the age of the woman and how much she and her female in-laws enjoy the practice.

This dress code emphasizes the similarity among *nuse* and their difference from the women related to the household by blood and from middle-aged, and elderly women. Young married women, like a cohort of novices, wear ostentatious uniform-like clothing, reserved for women of their status. Women who are related by blood to the hosts dress much less elaborately – in a simple long dress or even a short dress or pants – because here they are *bija*, daughters. To continue to dress up is considered inappropriate in middle age (see also Sugarman 1997: 176-177), hence subdued colours, fewer rhinestones, a straighter skirt often of below-the-knee length is reserved for women above forty-five. Some of the elderly women still wear the more modest form of Turkish trousers – *kule* and white headscarves. These different categories of women – *nuse*, *bijë*, and *plakë* – are easily recognizable among the female attendees at a feast, each marked through her clothing.

As I observed at feasts, a *nuse* often changes into up to four outfits in the course of an event. The number depends on how many outfits she has, how recently she has married and how closely related she is to the hosts. Furthermore, she would coordinate

the changes with the other *nuse* in attendance, so that they appear in *dimi* and *jeleks* simultaneously, perform a circle dance and take photos together. “Come on, why are you so late?” my sisters-in-law asked as my husband and I arrived at an engagement feast in our neighbourhood. “All the women are waiting for you, so that they can finally change from their *dimi* and *jeleks* into their dresses.” They helped me to dress in *dimi* and a *jelek* and no more than ten minutes and a round dance (see Image 11) later all the *nuse* from the neighbourhood disappeared to change into dresses.

I was told that the most intensive dressing up with the showiest outfits is expected in the first one or two years. Fjolla’s (b. 1990) mother-in-law prevented her from buying the two simpler dresses she had chosen, telling her that as a young *nuse* she should wear more elaborate dresses, she could buy plain dresses after a year or two. Sometimes a recent *nuse* wears her formal clothing in her everyday life as well. She is expected (even urged) to dress up, do her makeup and hair even at home, in some cases in the afternoon after she has finished her daily chores according to Melodi (b. 1991), or even while performing them according to Erblina (b. 1994). Dressing up in her best clothes when someone comes to visit is a must during those first months, and also when she is brought to someone’s home for the first time (*sefte*) to be introduced to them.

While one might think of dressing up as a private activity reflecting a woman’s individual style, my interviewees revealed the more collective character of the dressing up experience of Kosovo’s *nuse*. The practicalities of dressing up require a second pair of hands and eyes to zip up the dress, to ensure the *dimi* is folded exactly as it should be or that the hairdo still looks good. Fjolla (b. 1990), for example, needed her sister-in-law’s help to put on *dimi* in the first week of her marriage. The intimacy of dressing up together with other young married women from the household has the potential to strengthen their relationship. For one of my older interlocutors, Hanife (b. 1944), dressing up together with her sister-in-law in the afternoon after finishing with their chores was the day’s emotional high point – they helped each other and talked and laughed a lot. The collective dressing up also provides plenty of opportunities for sharing – of makeup, accessories, dresses – my sister-in-law would readily give me anything I would point at and offer many things she thought I might like.

Often a *nuse*'s mother- and sisters-in-law (husband's sisters) choose the outfits she will wear. The woman is expected to obey, even if gritting her teeth, but there are ways to negotiate some of the details. While Melodi (b. 1991) described how much her mother-in-law irritated her with her incessant demands that she wear her most ornate outfits, she also told me how at the last circumcision feast she attended her sister-in-law interceded with her mother-in-law on her behalf. For that feast, Melodi had chosen two dresses in which she felt more comfortable, but her mother-in-law insisted that she wears *dimi* and a *jelek* and then other, fancier dresses. "Look, you ask her to wear *dimi* and a *jelek*, so don't change the dresses she chose. Let her wear the *dimi* and the *jelek* for your pleasure (*qejf*) and the dresses – for her pleasure," her sister-in-law said.

A *nuse* is the ritual representative of the family and the bridal appearance is the outcome of teamwork – sometimes several family members contribute to it: her husband or brother-in-law drives her to and from the beauty salon, the daughters of the house and the mother-in-law act as her retinue, tidying her dress and hair and refreshing her makeup. The family also mobilizes its connections outside the household – married daughters bring their dresses to lend colour to the wardrobe of their brother's wife, a female relative who works as a hairdresser might come to fix her hair and makeup, diaspora members help financially. Then, at the feasts, the young married women stand next to each other, on display, visible and comparable, while their mothers-in-law brag to each other about the *nuse*'s outfits and hairdos. From the way mothers-in-law talk about their daughters-in-law's dressing up, it seems as if they take a great pleasure in that affair, maybe they find it entertaining or they reminisce about their own youth. There is a certain competition among the young women as well, but none among my interviewees admitted to engaging in it; they said that "yes, some women do compete" and interpreted it as jealousy or spite. Dressing up is territory of delicate negotiations of alliances, loyalties and dependencies between the women in the family. Once Melodi's sister-in-law insisted on doing her makeup and hair for a wedding, but the result was less than flattering. In fact, it was so bad, that several wedding guests asked her: "What happened to you? You have a great style, why do you look so awful tonight?" Although also not fond of her makeup and hairdo, Melodi pretended she liked it. "I did not want to show my sister-in-law in a bad light, but also I did not want people to think that I am eager to badmouth my sister-in-law."

Thus, by refusing to dress up, the pious Kadire (b.1998) does not simply cut out a custom she disapproves of. She rejects being a ritual representative of the family and she misses an opportunity for bonding with her mother-in-law. “My mother-in-law is not happy about it,” Kadire told me. “She says ‘how come you do not go [to weddings], other veiled women go...’”

## Heavy, sweaty, tight, delightful

The *nuse* outfits cause all kinds of discomfort. Some outfits are tight, in an attempt to make the woman’s waist look slimmer. “I was thin back then. And my [white] dress made me look even thinner. It was so tight that by the end of the day my back hurt. I wanted to look like a Barbie,” Ardita (b. 1993) says with a touch of irony. The Turkish trousers usually need to be tightened a lot in the waist, a red mark lingers on one’s skin for an hour or two afterwards. Rinesa’s (b. 1993) *dimi* are embroidered with beads and thus very heavy. She told me that one needs to tie them extra tightly on the belly – usually her mother-in-law helps with that; otherwise, they would not look good. After Rinesa fell pregnant, she avoided wearing the *dimi*, even though she liked them a lot, because she feared they would damage the baby. Some of the dresses are heavy too – one of Fjolla’s *nuse* dresses is covered with shiny “gemstones” and its straps leave red marks on her shoulders. “It must weigh seven or ten kilograms and after I wear it, I am exhausted.” The *nuse* dress code also requires wearing all the gold jewelry on some occasions, which adds extra weight. Fjolla said she remembers how she could hardly breathe once, when she was wearing more than one necklace.

The *nuse* clothes are often made of synthetic textiles that are uncomfortable, especially in summer. The *dallam*, the long vest which goes with the *dimi* is from a very thick material and thus also not what one would normally wear when the temperatures hit 30-35° Celsius. On the evening of my visit at Rinesa’s, we decided to dress up and dance. Rinesa generously lent me one of her bridal outfits, but within minutes after putting her traditional shirt decorated with stiff lace, and even before dressing into the *dallam*, I started sweating. On the next day, when doing the interview, Rinesa (b. 1992) said that in the summer one would sweat in those clothes; “you saw it yourself yesterday; one cannot wear them for too long” whereas in the winter one would feel cold in them. Fjolla (b. 1990) lightheartedly mused, that if the weddings were in October or November, she would enjoy them. And now that most of them are in August when the

migrants come back to Kosovo for vacation, dressing up is difficult to bear. “You have to dress up in *dimi*, in which your skin cannot breathe. Then, on top of that to wrap up in a *dallam*...”

A main concern when wearing *dimi* is to not stumble because its low crotch and wide legs dangle around the ankles and can get caught on the shoes’ high heels. To not stumble is my own preoccupation when wearing *dimi*, especially if I have to overcome several steps balancing a tray with cups filled with coffee to the brim.

Some women were used to wearing high-heeled shoes (such as the pairs in Images 13 and 14) before they got married (Erina b. 1993, Liria, b. 1990), so wearing them at their weddings was not a problem. But not so for Fjolla (b.1990) who suffered in her extremely high-heeled sandals. “It is difficult to put them on and walk a little, but the biggest problem is taking them off,” Fjolla complained. She could not return her feet back to normal; they hurt so much that the only way to calm down the pain was to dip them in water. “Only I know how I survived the *dita e grave* feast... Most of the time I spent in the room because I could not stand on those high heels anymore.” At the time of the interview, several years into her marriage, Fjolla’s female relatives told her that at the upcoming wedding she has to start making and serving coffee, so she prepared accordingly – she bought a pair of orthopedic sandals with lower thick heels, no matter what others might think. “I would spill the coffee if I wore the other shoes”, Fjolla said.

Finally, since women wear gold jewelry worth hundreds and even thousands of euros, they are anxious to not lose it. “Especially when I wear all my *liras*, do you know how stressful it is?” Erina (b. 1993) tells me. “I count them, I always do... Eight *liras*. Are they all there...? And if I happen to miscount them, I frantically count them again.” The *nuse* garments are also expensive (and sometimes borrowed), so women have to take care to not stain them. It is a mission impossible while having young children; hence, when they do, they dress more rarely, as someone has to look after the child while they are in their *nuse* regalia.

Coincidentally or not, the bridal attire reinforces ideas of propriety and dignified manners: the tight, long dresses restrict a *nuse*’s movements and her steps are tiny when dancing on her uncomfortable shoes (a *nuse* ought to dance differently than a



young unmarried woman, more slowly, as several of my interviewees and my sisters-in-law explained).

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“Even though *nuse* dresses pinch and cause discomfort, women wear them with zeal (*vullnet*) and buy them with pleasure (*qejf*),” D., a bridal dress designer says, and her words sum up the paradox with which this section deals. Despite the many discomforts women shared with me, a great many of them still enjoy dressing up in *nuse* outfits. The attention which the bridal appearance receives titillates women’s self-esteem and vanity: it is hard to resist the idea of appearing in one’s finest clothing while someone is singing to you “you are the prettiest, you are the prettiest” (*Je ma e mira*). Besides, festivities act as rites of reversal (Turner 1969: 177-178), a limited spacetime in which a *nuse*, otherwise in a lowly position, becomes a princess. The bustle of the festivities – the discussions what the *nuse* will wear, the infectious rhythms of the music, the glitter, the tiles of the restaurant reflecting the lights of the chandeliers, the compliments – acts as a breather from the monotony of household chores. And not unlike Cinderella who enters the reversed spacetime of the ball by dressing up, so do Kosovo women as well.

## **Blaze of gold and colour**

Contemporary Kosovo *nuse* and their families tend to go for much bolder and conspicuous looks than their West European sisters, both on their wedding days and afterwards. That means dresses with voluminous skirts (see Images 5 and 10), or with a lot of glitter.

“In Western Europe [...] they wear such dresses only at carnivals, right?” a shop assistant said somewhat bitterly pointing at the bridal attires on hangers and on mannequins. The heavy makeup often disguises a bride’s face beyond recognition, and that is not an exaggeration, but something I have observed multiple times – at the engagement which I attended, at the hairdresser’s, on social media and in the mirror when I myself was made up like that (see Images 6 and 7). I have heard that young children sometimes get frightened of the overblown appearance of a *nuse*. Liria’s toddler daughter cries when she sees her mother dressed up. “Even today, as we were about to

come to you, she opened the wardrobe and pulled at my dresses saying ‘Mommy, this is bad’ (Liria, b. 1990). A Twitter user makes fun of the Albanian bridal appearance posting a close-up photo of Meghan Markle as a bride side-by-side with an “Albanianized” version of it, photoshopped to equip the duchess with a sparkly necklace and earrings, bright red lipstick and orangey foundation; the caption reads “If Meghan were an Albanian bride.” As early as the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century, women travellers who visited the Ottoman Empire noticed the gold-embroidered clothes of urban Albanian women, their hair dyed black, their love for makeup (Karlova 1870: 172; Garnett 1891: 219-221; Durham 1909: 140; 1928: 198-199). The elements of the bridal attire need to be equally noticeable, bright, shiny, and, paradoxically, the final result is at the same time an embarrassment of riches and harmonious in its own way. Similar to the greeting and serving etiquette, such an appearance is meant to signal the family’s fine reputation, their high social, as well as economic capital. The logic of such status signaling can be summarized with “the more, the better.” Such styles also make the *nuse* visible and appealing at a distance for the hundred(s) of attendees: the overblown makeup resembles in intensity, if not in style, the makeup or masks of theater performers since antiquity, whereas the high heels have a function similar to the *cothurni*, the boots on raised soles of Roman actors. (Fjolla, b. 1990, wondered: “they see every day how tall I am, but at a wedding I have to grow?”)

The extravagant bridal look is informed by a notion of beauty that is in stark contrast with mainstream Western ideals in which a woman is either bestowed with beauty by the capricious Mother Nature or not, and she uses clothing and makeup to emphasize her strengths and conceal her flaws in invisible, “natural” ways. Kosovo *nuse* looks are informed by the idea that beauty is performative and woman-made, that it takes effort and skills to be achieved. A *nuse*’s plain features are not a problem, as long as she cares to groom herself and to dress up. Indeed, a critique one could often hear about a bride’s appearance was that she dressed too simply (*shumë thjesht ish ndreqë*), because too plain a makeup, a hairdo or a dress are read as lack of care or skill or as plain laziness (*ka pritu*). Garnett made an interesting comment in line with this argument. She observed that after several women from the bride’s family bathed, scrubbed, and depilated her, dyed her hair and eyebrows black, stained her hands red with henna, dressed and covered her with jewels, all the other women would criticize their work but not the bride’s physical characteristics. “For according to the good ladies of Scutari

[Shkodër], a bride can never be otherwise than beautiful,” Garnett concluded (1891: 250).

Once I looked on as H., a woman in her thirties, staying at her mother’s for the weekend, was getting ready to go home. Having gathered her own and her children’s clothes in a bag and waiting for her husband to come to pick her up, she started applying makeup – foundation, mascara, black eyeline, lipstick. I asked her why she needed to do that, she was going home after all and I found her face fresh and beautiful without makeup. She replied that if she did not, her in-laws would think that she had started neglecting her appearance. We both laughed when she added that her husband actually detested her makeup. Only after hearing H.’s mother-in-law, Remzije (b. 1964), describe how, when she was a *nuse* herself, she used to daily wash her hair, make a hairdo, apply makeup and dress up in a dress or *dimi* and a *jelek* just for pleasure – her mother-in-law’s and her own – I understood what H. meant. Remzije went on to compare her own enthusiasm with what she perceived as younger women’s laziness for and even neglect of dressing up – H. wanted to avoid being seen in such a light.

## Intermission

### The henna night: brother and sister (Ep. 5)

Lulije models outfit after outfit and the women mesmerized by her young beauty and accomplished movements take turns in dancing face to face with her in playful competition. These duet dances alternate with circle dances led by Lulije in which the women hand in hand walk in a simple step.

Lulije's mother ties around her neck a ribbon with a gold coin, a *lira* that she used to wear as a young married woman. The bride's infirm grandmother makes a couple of unsteady dancing steps with her hands up and a bright smile. "There is nothing better than getting married," she says knowingly and attaches a small coin, a *qerek lira*, to Lulije's vest. "May God bless you with many kids". Lulije embraces her and the knot in her stomach tightens.

Only the closest of Lulije's male relatives are present – her father and brothers, uncle Muhamet and uncle Naim; they are sitting at a table near the balcony, the furthest from the dancing women. A cloud of cigarette smoke hangs over their heads as they chain-smoke in an effort to blow away their embarrassment over all these "women's affairs".

Aunt Kumrije gestures towards Ermal and Arianit, Lulije's two brothers; it is their turn to join the bride. A song performed by a male rapper and a female pop singer that celebrates the relationship between sisters and brothers has started playing. Ermal, an already married man and a father, and the adolescent Arianit leave the secluded table and start dancing. Their ungainly movements resemble rotating airplanes, not knowing where to land in this landscape of intense emotions. Krenare joins the threesome in an ocean of sequins tightly hugging her forms.

(...) *me një sofër bashkë u rritëm, një gjë nana na ka dhanë* (We grew up eating at the same *sofër*, / our mother fed us from the same breast...), the voice of the female singer summons the spirit of family togetherness. It descends upon the attendees and moistens their eyes.

Here he is, Ermal, who, when they were growing up, every so often teased Lulije until she would break down in tears. She used to plan bold revenges while falling asleep. And Arianit? He absolutely drives her mad playing games on his phone all afternoon and not even

standing up to fill a glass of water for himself. And yet, in this moment, as she sees her feminine grace reflected in their eyes, Lulije longs to spend the rest of her life offering them water and listening to their silly jokes.

The rapper justifies the brothers' undue jealousy with the desire to protect their sisters... It was Ermal who found out about her romance with Ilir, Lulije recalls while waving the *mindil* to the rhythm of the chanting. He took all measures foreseen for this type of situation: interrogated her ("what's going on?", "who's that guy?", "are you two serious?"), threatened to have a man-to-man conversation with Ilir, and told her father what was going on.

The two young men now step more self-assuredly than before taking on some of the aura of the strong brother declaring he would kill anyone who would threaten his sister.

Under the last sounds of the song, Ermal and Arianit adorn Lulije with gold bracelets and withdraw to the men's table leaving Lulije and the other women to dance in circles, like porcelain figurines on a music box.

## Chapter 4.

### “I will love you as my daughter”<sup>12</sup>

In this chapter, I look at patrilocality in contemporary rural Kosovo. I briefly describe the ritualized departure from home and some of the emotions upon arrival at the new home. I also discuss the practical implications of the patrilocal arrangement, including how a patrilocal arrangement structures a woman’s social milieu after marriage. Next, I offer a glimpse into the relationships a recently married woman creates with her in-laws and, especially, her mother-in-law. In a multigenerational home, the latter might be the most important relationship, essential for the smooth running of the household and the solidarity in the family. Public displays of affection between a *nuse* and her mother-in-law strive to enact the ideal that they could, or even should, become as close as blood relatives, but also to project its achievement to others. It is also an attempt to resist a prevalent discourse which paints the relationship between mothers- and daughters-in-law as inherently strained. At the end of the chapter, I discuss the role of patrilocality in some *nuse* practices.

The functioning of kinship ties is neither natural, nor self-explanatory, but depends on local ideologies and practices. Kosovo Albanians have traced kinship through the patriline and practiced arranged marriage, village exogamy and patrilocality for such a long time that these marriage practices are engrained in the marriage terminology. Thus, especially, elderly and middle-aged women talk about ‘catching a bride’ (*me zënë nuse*) and ‘taking a bride’ (*me marrë nusen*) when a young man gets engaged and married, ‘giving the girl’ (*me dhënë çikën*) when a young woman’s marriage is agreed upon. They may also use expressions such as *me shku nuse* (‘to go as a bride’) and *me shku te burri* (to go to one’s husband’s [home]) as a way of saying that a woman gets married (see Aleksova 2013: 28-30). Folk reasoning attaches not just a natural but a supernatural significance to this arrangement – a popular henna night song finishes with philosophical “the Great Lord has so bequeathed it – to take a woman and to give a woman (*Zoti i madh kështu e ka lanë-ee, çikë me marrë, çikë me dhanë-*

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<sup>12</sup> From Shyhrete Behluli’s wedding song “*Hajde, nuse, reja jeme*” (Come on, bride, my daughter-in-law).

ee)<sup>13</sup>. In fact, it is the taking of the bride on the day agreed between the two families, that signals that the couple has legitimately married. The couple is considered married, even if they choose not to have a wedding celebration, even if they forego the prayer and blessing from the *hoxha*, the Muslim cleric, and even if they do not register the marriage in the municipality.

The farewell and departure of the bride from her parental home is the emotional culmination of a woman's wedding experience. Several days of rituals from the old days are condensed in the contemporary henna night (*kanagjegj*) – the applying of henna, the bride's lament and women's visits to inspect the gifts from the groom's family and the bride's trousseau. Nowadays the event mostly revolves around dancing and dressing up in bridal outfits in some cases showing all the formal outfits with which the bride enters married life. Fjolla (b. 1990) regarded modeling the outfits as a better, more fun alternative to exhibiting them on the walls of a room (as in Image 16 in Appendix E). Nowadays, only some brides and their families decide to perform the ritual lament described in Episode 6. Those among my interviewees who performed it, told me the songs were very touching and they really meant it when they cried. "I cried so much that I got a hoarse voice," Melodi (b. 1991) said. They mourned that they would no longer live with their parents and expressed their distress over the imminent change in their lives. Melodi (b. 1991) and Erblina, (b. 1994) said that crying brought them relief. Sometimes deeply personal losses, such as the passing of a parent, add to the pain – Liria (b. 1990), whose mother had passed away less than half a year prior to the wedding, got so distressed at her *kanagjegj* that her father put an end to the song. "He pitied me and stopped them [...], took their tambourines and told them to not sing to me anymore, because I got so sad".

## The henna ceremony: Lulije bids farewell (Ep. 6)

*Shuni gra e oj shuni fëmijë-e / do të mbajna ori pak qetësi-e / pak qetësi-e oj duhet me majtë-e / për me ni Lulijen tuj kajtë-e...* (Women and children, be quiet; we must keep quiet in order to hear Lulije crying).

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<sup>13</sup> The word used in Albanian corresponds to the English 'girl', suggesting a particular life-stage category and young age.

The monotonous voice of the singer throws heavy words at Lulije. How come you are turning your back to your mother to go after a man? Lulije stands up from her baroque-style throne under the red canopy and embraces her mother sitting nearby. How come you were lured by a pair of *dimi* to leave your father's home? Aunt Kumrije leads the bride-to-be to her father. The aunt's task is to cue Lulije what to do at every step of the intricate ritual. The song goes on to describe how her brother would cut down all the trees under which she has played as a girl. Lulije clings to Ermal, but aunt Kumrije lightly squeezes her arm to let him go, as the singer now asks her who will be welcoming her married sister, Krenare, when she comes to visit at their parental home and which *teze*, maternal aunt, she likes best.

Lulije carries out the singer's next request. She touches the goat skin of the *def*, a tambourine, with the tips of her fingers on which aunt Kumrije has just applied some henna. The five fingermarks of henna on the tambourine are a keepsake for her mother.

Lulije wonders whether they would use this tambourine to sing to other brides. Maybe they would welcome Arianit's bride with it? Or maybe it would remain silent, hanging in her mother's bedroom to remind her of her grown-up daughter who has left home?

The cracking of the microphone startles Lulije. Now her aunt is guiding her fingers to the *def* again to put five more fingermarks for her father and then two more for each of her brothers.

Is this overwhelming guilt coming from the stains on the brand-new tambourine or from the tears in her mother's eyes? Lulije cannot decide. A wave of sorrow rises in her chest.

In the months leading up to her wedding, she avoided thinking that getting married meant leaving her parental home. "Nowadays everything is different compared to the time when our mothers and grandmothers were getting married. I can call mom whenever I need to, and I will come often to visit," Lulije told her schoolfriend Rina a couple of days ago. "But, I guess, I would still like to have a henna ceremony; after all, it is our custom."

*Ulem n'sofër o me hangër darkë-e / luga tepër mori veni thatë-e* (I sit down at the table for dinner, / and there is a spare spoon and your seat is empty).

Lulije can hardly breathe under the heavy red veil decorated with sequins. She has heard those words sung at other women's henna ceremonies, but only now they reverberate



through her entire being. Aunt Kumrije time and again wipes Lulije's tears, but many find their way under the veil and drop on her hands clasped in her lap. Krenare, Lulije's sister who sits to her left in order to assist aunt Kumrije with the henna, presses her hand sympathetically.

*Kaj Lulije o moj kaj me za-e / se ti çikë o moj nuk babesh ma-e* (Weep, oh Lulije, sob, because you will never again be a girl).

Her unmarried cousins and girlfriends from school and the dancing group, dressed in red and with wreaths of artificial white flowers are sitting in her feet. Some of them stare at her shaking shoulders. Others look down at the candles in front of them trying to conceal their own emotions. Yet others watch the scene through their smartphone cameras as they record it.

*Ngjitet kana oj me pika t'kuqe / nesër mbrama je bajrak nër nuse* (We put henna in red dots, tomorrow evening you will be a flag among the brides). Aunt Kumrije applies henna on Lulije's palms.

The henna's intense smell lingers for a while. Lulije's mother, grandmother and many aunts recall their farewells with their families some thirty or fifty years ago when they, back then skinny adolescent girls, ventured into the unknown.

The henna ceremony is over. Lulije, exhausted from crying, has a headache and her eyes are burning. Back in the dressing room, she wonders how she is supposed to take off the red dress, put on yet another outfit and continue partying as if all this has never happened.

## **The wedding: Venturing into married life (Ep. 7)**

[On the day after the henna night. The groom's party takes the bride and departs for Ilir's home.]

Halime carefully arranges the skirt of her daughter's dress and the red veil which is supposed to guard her against evil eye until she reaches her new home. Lulije's mother utters a blessing (*"Tsballa babesh rehat"* / "God willing, you will live well"), and closes the door of the silver Volkswagen Golf 5. "I will come to visit as often as possible. I will come every week," Lulije repeats to herself sniffing her tears away.

When they have passed the last house of her village, Lulije sits and makes herself comfortable. In accordance with an old custom the meaning of which no one remembers, she had to stand in the car bending over until her father's house was no longer in view. A procession of at least thirty cars is accompanying them, blaring their horns.

The driver is Ilir's uncle Xhemajl, the one for whom Ilir works in Germany, and this is his car. Behare in the front seat dozes almost immediately. Shqipe's youngest son, six-year-old Jon, sits with Lulije in the back of the car. He has come in the role of *djali i kerrit*, the "boy of the carriage." He is busy opening his gift car from Lulije's family and rolling it all over, including Lulije's dress, but she hardly notices. For once, Lulije is thankful for the Albanian tradition which proscribes her from talking until she meets the groom. It gives her time to pull herself together. She mentally lists Ilir's relatives trying to recall any unusual circumstances in their lives. This strategy diverts her thoughts from her parents' tears and their last kisses that still burn her cheeks. Three paternal uncles, two paternal aunts. She needs to ask Ilir about the widowed woman in the *mahalla*, so that she does not say anything *palidhje*, foolish, when greeting her. Also, there was one childless woman, as far as Lulije remembers.

The car procession is welcomed with popular melodies performed on two *surlas*, woodwind instruments, and two *tupans*, big drums. The four Roma musicians are in a very upbeat mood, as each of them has just received a *bakshish* of 50 euros from Ilir's father.

It is Ilir who opens the door of the car and helps Lulije out. She feels the beat of the *tupans* vibrating in her guts. Ilir lifts her veil and kisses her on the forehead. Exclamations and handclapping. The bride knows how to behave: she stands motionless, her eyes cast down, her chin slightly raised, her hands on her belly. Her dignified figure is multiplied on the screens of the attendees' phones, as if in a kaleidoscope.

Ilir's father, Ali, now Lulije's father-in-law, greets her in his home and adorns her curls with a one-hundred-euro bill. A blissfully smiling Mihane, now Lulije's mother-in-law, fastens a necklace with a gold coin on Lulije's neck. Lulije bends her knees slightly, takes her mother-in-law's hand and brings it three times to her forehead. This morning, she has spent almost an hour practicing this gesture with Krenare. "It won't hurt you to learn to perform *marrje e*

*dorës* well since you will be doing it for some time to come,” her sister told her. “The tiniest things make a bride stand out or fail.”

## The multigenerational household

Kosovo’s consistently large households of about six people (ASK 2013: 12) show an ongoing tendency for extended families to live together – which includes marrying women moving in with their in-laws. In an extended-family household each conjugal couple has a room of their own. It is usually furnished by the groom’s family before and especially for the wedding (Reineck 1991: 98-99, described also in Statovci’s novel, 2017: 109-110) and is considered a *nuse’s* domain (Backer 2015 [1979]: 104; Hasluck even notes that the mother-in-law has no right to enter it, 1954: 28).

Many women, especially in rural areas, end up spending a good portion of their married lives in the home of their husband’s parents, sometimes with other married brothers and unmarried siblings. This was certainly the case for my elderly and middle-aged interviewees, but patrilocal arrangements continue to be widespread for both economic and ideological reasons. Out of my fourteen younger interviewees, eleven were living with their in-laws at the time of the interview.

Given the high unemployment rates, there are few young people who have steady income and can afford paying rent or buying a home so early in their lives. Thus, patrilocality makes starting a family, a highly valorized life goal, attainable at an early age, since neither the young man, nor his chosen one need to become economically independent to marry and have children. For the two interviewees from the youngest cohort who began their married lives in separate homes, it meant delaying their marriages – Erza (b. 1995) had a four-year engagement period and no wedding feast, whereas Erdeta (b. 1989) and her husband married later in life (Erdeta was 29, her husband in his early thirties).

Ideally, a wife can rely on her husband to play the role of the breadwinner while she is busy raising the children and taking care of the household. The husband’s parents support the young family financially and with childcare, and when they grow old, their daughter-in-law reciprocates by caring for them. “I am puzzled by [people in] other countries – when they turn eighteen years old, when they find a wife, they don’t care

about their parents anymore, but I don't agree with this" Donjeta told me (b. 1997). She went on to say that she found it unacceptable to repay one's parents in such a way, after they suffered so much raising their children. Thus, many see patrilocality as filial duty and a part of a good old model which ensures that no one is left behind. Considering that in rural Kosovo institutional care is not readily available, and the care for the young, elderly and sick is still regarded as a family responsibility (Leutloff-Grandits 2019), and more specifically, women's responsibility, it is not surprising that many people feel that newly married couples are selfish if they choose to set up separate households. Still, two of my interviewees moved out within one or two years of their marriage and both were decisively in favour of a neolocal arrangement. Moving out of the house she shared with her brothers-in-law and their families was a huge relief to Ardita's (b. 1993), because the relationships with her sisters-in-law had been strained. Ardita's parents-in-law were long deceased when she married, and the separation of brothers is expected to happen at some point and does not have the same moral connotations of abandonment. "I think that everyone in our generation would like to and believes that it is better to live only with their husbands," Kadire (b. 1998) told me in our follow-up conversation, in which she shared the news of her relocation to the capital city where she and her husband lived in a rented apartment and both worked. The biggest obstacle for young couples to live separately was the current difficult economic situation, according to her. While Kadire who had recently moved out from her in-laws' home obviously disliked the patrilocal arrangement, she nevertheless expressed her willingness to go back if her in-laws' health situation called for it.

Melodi (b. 1991), who married in 2014, lived in a household of eleven, including her husband, her son, her parents-in-law as well as her brother-in-law, his wife and their four children. The men in Melodi's household pool their resources – wages and profits from their small car repair business – and Melodi's other brother-in-law, who lives in Germany, sends remittances. Melodi's comment on this arrangement was brief. "Everything is alright, and it functions well." She maybe felt uncomfortable sharing more details with an outsider or was simply tired of answering my questions. At other occasions in my short acquaintanceship with her and her husband, they expressed a desire to move out to a nearby town.

## **The *mahalla***

Ideally, over the life course of a family, the brothers one by one, eventually marry and build new houses next to the old parental home, helping each other in this undertaking. They divide the land and any other property, move out, and each nuclear family becomes a separate household, but they remain socially and economically close. It is an unwritten rule that the parental house remains for the youngest brother; the care for his elderly parents is also his responsibility (Hasluck 1954: 57, 63). The scenario is neither universal nor mandatory: conflicts arise, families migrate abroad, to the city or to another village. A *mahalla*, or a neighbourhood, consists mostly of families that have once been in the same household.

The family of Fatime (b. 1962) presents an example of the life course of a family as it developed from a single household into a small *mahalla*. In 1987 an elderly couple and their three grown sons with wives and children, a total of seventeen people moved from a nearby village where they had lived under one roof. At their new place, on some two hectares of land in the outskirts of the village, they continued to live together pooling their resources until 1992. Then, the youngest brother split into a separate house which he built nearby with the help of his brothers. The two older brothers followed three years later. At the time of writing, the inhabitants of the *mahalla* number 28 people (six migrants returning from time to time are not included) and live in five households. The seven married *bija* (literally 'daughters'), come to visit, sometimes as often as once every two weeks. Currently, in three of the houses, three generations live together. The largest household consists of eight people – a middle-aged couple with their two sons, one of them married and with children – and they have decided to remain together in the large new house they finished building several years ago.

## **The women from the *mahalla* at the wedding banquet (Ep.8)**

[In the evening, in a luxurious restaurant on the highway Prishtina-Ferizaj.]

“Look, Lulije has posted a picture from their photo session,” Ariona, exclaims and shows Blerta the Instagram post on her phone screen. The two examine it. Ilir with a gaze turned to an unknown future awkwardly holds Lulije at the waist. Ariona’s manicured thumb gives a like to the photo.

Ariona and Blerta are cousins and close friends. Blerta, the daughter of Bukurie and Ilir's uncle Hakim, who was killed in the Kosovo war, is now in her twenties. After the war, Hakim's brothers took turns caring for Bukurie and her three orphaned children.

Blerta recognizes the pond of the restaurant Anije, a popular destination for photo sessions of engaged and married couples, and enthusiastically tells Ariona about her own recent visit to the trendy restaurant.

Next to them, Safete is boasting to Bukurie about her daughter-in-law, the dutiful and quiet Arta, who managed to launder all the carpets at the beginning of the summer, despite her pregnancy. "*Nuse për merak*" (A precious bride) Safete exclaims. Dressed in a smart evening dress, Arta is standing in a line-up at the door, welcoming the guests. Shqipe, Safete's eldest daughter-in-law, is chasing after Jon, who is running around with a cousin. She hands him to his father who puts Jon on the chair next to him and continues an animated political debate with some relatives living in Germany. Jon slips down unnoticed and launches an organized assault on the kitchen. The bride and groom have not arrived yet.

Blerta examines the photo focusing on the lace bodice with short sleeves and the satin skirt of Lulije's pearly dress. "Don't you think her dress is a bit too plain?" Blerta says, scanning Lulije's dress.

"I don't know," Ariona drawls her voice. "Mom and *dada* Qëndresë had chosen a ballgown with a much richer skirt, you know... but she did not like it and she chose this dress instead." She looks at the picture again. "The silhouette of the dress is actually quite pleasant but, if I had such a figure, I would choose a gown that emphasizes it," Ariona sighs. She doesn't like her curves.

"Yeah, like a mermaid or something. How much did it cost?" Blerta wants to know.

They bought so many things for Lulije that Ariona cannot keep track of it all. "I think it was 400 euros, but I am not sure. I don't want to seem jealous or something, but I cannot understand why they needed to make such a fuss of this wedding ..."

"How can you say such a thing, Ariona? This is not much for a wedding dress. A girlfriend of mine had a dress for 1,000 euros," Blerta counters.

“Oh, I am not talking only about the dress. Imagine, they bought her gold jewelry for almost 3,000 euros! We could use some of that money for a new kitchen or something...”

“Well, I don’t think that you will say no to the gold jewelry when your time comes,” Blerta, herself engaged, is amused. Ariona opens her mouth to say something but is interrupted as the DJ announces the couple’s arrival. She dashes to a spot from where she can better see them. Safete and Bukurie interrupt their exchange of baklava and cake recipes.

The DJ plays an instrumental interpretation of *Baresha* (The Shepherdess), a well-liked Albanian song. The restaurant staff dims the lights. Some of the closest relatives of the couple have gathered near the entrance and hold sparklers. Ilir and Lulije descend slowly down the two sides of a double staircase and join hands at its bottom.

After the couple is escorted to their table, Safete turns to Arta. “Arta, *bijë*, why don’t you change into the blue dress? *Kam qejf* (It would be a pleasure for me) to see you in it”. Arta retreats accompanied by Shqipe to assist her. The air throbs with the loud music and conversations are scarce.

In a small room adjacent to the restaurant kitchen, Shqipe is fastening the back zipper of Arta’s dress. To Arta’s relief, this one has a higher waist and is thus more suitable for her pregnant belly.

In the last couple of years, Shqipe has stopped dressing up in her most elaborate outfits and changing into multiple dresses when attending feasts. “Now it is your turn to suffer,” Shqipe laughs.

“I don’t mind dressing up” Arta says quietly. Actually, she would have preferred to stay home tonight; the pregnancy leaves her tired. “It seems that *nana* (mother) likes it quite a bit.”

Shqipe furrows her brows. “I never particularly enjoyed it”, she says brusquely. She was rather content to abandon her fanciest outfits after Arta married into the family. “And this whole dressing up thing is very impractical when you have children.” Shqipe helps Arta slip into her high-heel shoes. “You will see for yourself.” The two years of shared household chores, Shqipe’s outspokenness and longer experience in marriage and Arta’s bashful manners have shaped their relationship into one of a master and an apprentice.

Back in the hall, tireless guests show their dancing skills in the circle dance and in groups of individual competing dancers. Safete turns to Bukurie to praise Arta's dress. "Isn't she just lovely in it?" Bukurie agrees half-heartedly. The sleeveless dress is not especially flattering to Arta's plump arms.

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It is after one o'clock am. The newlyweds and the majority of the attendees have left. The singer who entertained the guests for the best part of the evening, is also gone, but the DJ plays *qyqeks* for a handful of tireless dancers. The elation hanging in the air shortens the distance between their bodies and makes their movements bolder. Shqipe dances for the first time in a long time with her husband who is quite inebriated by this point; their mischievous son has fallen asleep on two joined chairs. Even though tired from the five hours of serving, the waiters are not indifferent to the alluring rhythms and they adjust their steps to it pushing the trolleys with half-empty plates.

Arta, dressed in her third outfit for the evening, stands in the line-up at the door, seeing off guests and smiling politely to everyone. Safete and Bukurie are packing up Arta's dresses and accessories.

Giggling, Ariona and Blerta discuss a young man from Lulije's family. The cousins have removed their high-heel shoes and the cold tiles soothe their burning feet.

"Next summer we will dance at your wedding," Blerta teases her cousin. Ariona had caught Lulije's bouquet and everyone knows what that means. "Do you want me to find out his name?"

"Shh, for God's sake. Auntie Bukurie and Auntie Safete are coming! They might hear you."

## **Patrilocal adoption**

Patrilocality and patrilineality effectively mean that the groom's family adopts the young woman. Van Gennep also finds a resemblance between wedding and adoption rituals in that both the adoptee and the young wife change their names and residences (1960: 141). A *nuse* takes up some of the duties, care, and emotional support a daughter is expected to carry out before getting married and, ideally, she should become



as close to her mother-in-law as her own daughter(s). Reineck describes the mother-in-law as “a surrogate mother” to the *nuse* (1991: 99-100) and the rest of her affinal female relatives act as “confidants, advisers, spies, emissaries and surrogate kin for the disoriented, insecure outsider in their midst” (1991: 101). It is customary for affinal relatives to address each other with biological kinship terms, like calling one’s mother-in-law ‘mom’ (*nanë*), enacting and exhibiting a close relationship with the affinal family. Several of my interviewees went beyond that custom and enthusiastically emphasized how close they are with their mothers-/daughters-in-law by comparing the relationship to a biological one. According to Zymrije (b. 1961) it was “as if we were a mother and a daughter; we worked together, she took me everywhere with her and no one has ever heard us fight.” Similarly, Hatixhe (b. 1943) praised one of her daughters-in-law, the one with whom she and her husband lived in Germany, saying that she looked after them as if they were her own mother and father, whereas Rahime (b. 1952) recounted how her mother-in-law used to say that she loved her more than her own daughter. In all three occasions, there were other people present at the interview, including my mother-in-law, so I am not sure for whose benefit these remarks were made: did the women sincerely believe these claims, or did they want to believe them? Or maybe they aimed to teach their own daughters-in-law, sometimes also present, or me, the foreign *nuse*, to appreciate our mothers-in-law? Whatever the motivation, similarly to the bragging about the appearances of “their *nuse*”, these situations can be construed as displays that aim to demonstrate to a relevant audience that the patrilocal family works and does so well (Finch 2007).

Nevertheless, even rituals reveal that a marrying woman is seen as being “in-between” the two families. On the day after the wedding, *dita e grave*, when through songs, jokes and various tests, the groom’s female relatives challenge a bride’s patience and maturity, the singing women asked Fjolla (b. 1990) to either let her handkerchief (*mindil*) fall on the ground “for her mother-in-law’s sake” or attach it to her belt “for her mother’s sake”. Then they arranged some grains in the form of two hearts – one with the initials of her brother, the other with the initials of her husband – and asked her to gather the grains. As Fjolla was forewarned, she let her handkerchief fall and put it on her belt and then gathered the grains from the two hearts simultaneously, thus expressing loyalty towards both her affinal and her biological family.

Women's relocation to the patrilocal home came with a variety of experiences. As a starter, many women discovered that their in-laws had different wedding customs – indeed, a recurring theme was that customs differ not only from one village to another, but also from one family to another (Fjolla, b. 1990, Melodi, b. 1991, Ardita, b. 1993). My younger interviewees gave multiple examples: whether or not the bride should be present at the engagement, the lyrics of the songs at the women's feast after the wedding or whether she should dress up when she goes for the first time to her parental home after the wedding. Women were impressed with even the tiniest differences, possibly because they were unexpected and because part of them had to be negotiated during the festivities, when women were under the inspecting gaze of many people and a lot of stress. Another set of experiences come with a woman's new status, and yet others have to do with the different everyday routine in a new home in a different village. Ardita (b. 1993) who grew up in a village about 35 km away from her husband's, found everything in her new home so different – the people and even the food – that she even called it a "different culture." Kadire (b. 1998) noted that the order in which the refreshments are served at her in-laws' differed from what she was used to at home. Another example are Melodi's (b. 1991) anxieties starting several months before the wedding and continuing into her married life. When the wedding date was set, she started worrying about her in-laws' different customs, whether she would be able to show her respect for them and what would happen to her plans to continue to study and eventually find work. Several times throughout the interview she emphasized how difficult the beginning was ("my life changed, I can say, to 90 degree"). The difficulties arose both from her new status as a *nuse* which obliged her to serve guests (something she was not used to doing at her natal home), to wear uncomfortable clothes and to obey her in-laws and because her in-laws' family was so different. She described her in-laws as much more conservative than her own family and when asked to explain the difference, she described her family as urbanized and Westernized, implying that her in-laws are somewhat backward but without using such language:

We lived as if in the city. Because my brothers live abroad, my sisters-in-law live abroad, and Mother lives part of the time there and part here. We are with some customs from abroad [...] We went out to Prishtina, I used to go to Prishtina every day, to D. (a town near her village), to other villages. [...] When I would go out, I would only tell my mom or my brother: "I am going out with girlfriends, I am going to Prishtina or to D. When I married M., I had to ask them (her in-laws) "can I go?" One thing bothered me: not

that I could not go out freely with girlfriends, but that I had to ask their permission to go to my mother (her parental home is in a nearby village).

Fortunately, soon Melodi was able to work out a solution to this with her husband and they agreed that she only needed to tell him when she wanted to go to her parental home.

Since in most cases, their marriage was the first time women stayed away from their natal homes, in the beginning some of them felt homesick and sad. Donjeta (b. 1997) who had left two younger siblings behind, still children, was preoccupied with thoughts about them when she came to live with her husband's family. She had taken care of them until that moment, especially after their mother's death, and she was saddened that they would no longer share a bedroom. In the first days, Liria's (b. 1990) thoughts also wandered off to her parental home: "My mind was always there, [thinking] how they are, what they are doing".

## **Lulije, the newcomer (Ep. 9)**

Lulije's hand comes upon the heap of soiled wet wipes on the nightstand. She used at least ten of them until no more mascara would come off her eyelashes. Then it bumps into the pile of hairpins and bobby pins with hair tangled around them. In the dark bedroom of the couple, Lulije gropes for her smart phone. She needs to use the bathroom, but she does not want to wake Ilir up. The scant light cast by her phone gives the objects in the room an unworldly look. Barefoot, Lulije makes her way to the door, sidestepping the white mountain in the middle of the room – in reality a chair with her wedding dress thrown on it – and the black shadow next to the door where she knows her open suitcase is.

In the hallway, Lulije cannot remember which of the three closed doors leads to the bathroom. Mihane, shows her head through one of the doors – a light sleeper, she has heard Lulije's steps in the hallway. Lulije feels her blood throbbing in her ears as she whispers, "I was looking for the bathroom. I forgot where it was." Mihane gives Lulije her own slippers, shows her into the bathroom, waits in front of the door and escorts her back to the bedroom.

While Lulije crawls under the quilt next to Ilir, she tries to understand why she feels so homesick despite her mother-in-law's kindness. Listening to Ilir's rhythmic breathing, in fact almost a stranger but, since yesterday, her husband, Lulije again falls asleep.

## The mother-in-law

The *nuse's* relationship with her mother-in-law is possibly one of the most important ones during the *nuse* period. Many of the *nuse* practices after her marriage are informed by it and inform it. Women carefully build bridges, and put up with their mothers-in-law's demands, maintain some of the customs which went with the *nuse* status in the past – like the gestures of respect *marrje e dorës* and *temena* (see Episode 11) and negotiate their way out of others – such as asking the consent of all their in-laws before visiting their parents. Mothers-in-law, on the other hand, remembering their own hardships, try to help their daughters-in-law with the housework and childcare even though they are sincerely mystified why on earth anyone would find a reason to complain given all the children's clothes, diapers, washing machines and vacuum cleaners that were scarce or non-existent when they were *nuse*.

“Master, boss, general, you name it, that is what a mother-in-law becomes after the wedding,” S. laughed. Her words are characteristic of the rich humorous discourse that has formed around the relationship of the young married woman with her mother-in-law. This discourse casts the mother-in-law as petty and controlling, and the daughter-in-law as spoiled and selfish. Being aware of this prevalent discourse, some young married women and their mothers-in-law work hard against it and, as illustrated above, publicly express their mutual appreciation, amicable attitude, and respect. “If a mother-in-law wants order in her home, she must work hard herself, to give a good example to her *nuse*. One needs to approach a daughter-in-law kindly,” a mother-in-law said in a random conversation with other women in a hospital room, while her young daughter-in-law was receiving treatment. She did not know me and had no idea about my research; her short speech came as if from nowhere, without introduction of any sort and was addressed to no one in particular. “No, sometimes the daughter-in-law just happens to be bad,” another middle-aged woman retorted. The young woman kept silent. I felt uneasy. If prompted, most of my interviewees declared that they had a good time with their mothers-in-law (and most mothers-in-law would say the same). In fact, sometimes

they volunteered such statements, maybe anticipating my question. I also witnessed conversations in which mothers- and daughters-in-law praised each other in each other's presence; my own mother-in-law never misses an opportunity to extol the virtues of her daughters-in-law.

Despite the many jokes about this difficult relationship, I learned of very few real-life tensions between mothers- and daughters-in-law. Melodi (b. 1991) with whom I talked in private, several times admitted to feeling annoyed with her mother-in-law's countless requests to change clothes. Kadire (b. 1998) who because of her religious beliefs refused to go to wedding parties and dress up with *nuse* clothes also led me understand that this created tension in her relationship with her mother-in-law. In our follow-up conversation, Kadire, already living separately, expressed her belief that the very idea of a patrilocal arrangement not only violates the privacy of a marital couple, but necessarily strains the relationship with the mother-in-law. "Because when you live with your mother-in-law, small misunderstandings arise every day, without any doubt, whereas if you do not live together and rarely see each other, the relationship remains better."

## **Patrilocality and the *nuse* practices**

Erdeta (b. 1989), who stressed that her in-laws are fine people, nevertheless felt better living only with her husband and child and nicely formulated another aspect of living with one's mother-in-law. She observed that while she was free to decline her mother-in-law's offer to go with her for a visit somewhere explaining that she had a lot of housework, her sister-in-law who lived with her mother-in-law did not have that luxury. A *nuse* who lives with her mother-in-law, has to be constantly available, to make compromises, and ultimately, be less herself, Erdeta said.

When asked to summarize for me the *nuse* experience, primary school teacher Ardita (b. 1993) said that it was both a responsibility and a pleasure. She clarified that a *nuse* had to attend other people's weddings at her husband's side no matter how busy she might be; her absence would spoil the hosts' pleasure. And then, the attendance was pleasurable for the *nuse* herself because everyone admired her and she felt superior, Ardita admitted. I was surprised that Ardita's summary of what being a *nuse* meant, was confined to the attendance of and dressing up for wedding festivities. It

seems that this is reflective of her situation as a woman who has managed to become independent – she has a steady job as a teacher and has moved out into a separate home with her husband and children after living for two years with her brothers- and sisters-in-law. Since Ardita's parents-in-law passed away before her marriage, Ardita did not need the *nuse* practices to establish a relationship with her mother-in-law. She strongly emphasized both employment and neolocal residence as positive elements defining her life. While gender roles persist – Ardita is still the one mostly in charge of the care of her young children and the household work – far from her sisters-in-law's scrutinizing gazes and the tension of affinal relationships, Ardita has gained some independence to do things as she pleases. In the absence of her sisters-in-law, her gender and family practices were less oriented towards a third party's gaze. It seems that Ardita, Erdeta (b. 1989), Erza (b.1995) who each had professions and lived separately from their in-laws, could now choose to claim only the more decorative, ritual aspects of being a Kosovo *nuse*; they have become *nuse* on-call for festivities and visits. And besides, a professional woman can hardly put up with the entire range of routines expected of a rural *nuse* if working full-time outside of the home.

The ongoing practice of patrilocality creates fruitful ground for tensions. It puts a newly married woman in the position of a stranger who needs to fit into a pre-existing family structure and must put up with the unit's way of life. Patrilocality effectively means that a woman is stripped of a place in which she can go about her everyday work in consonance with her own understanding. While a woman leaves her parental home for good and becomes part of her husband's household, her new home feels alien to her, at least in the first years. Of course, the situation depends on many factors – the personalities, desires, understandings and lifepaths of everyone involved in it. Sometimes young women find loving mothers-in-law, sometimes through marriage they escape unhealthy family situations, sometimes their in-laws are elderly, and the young women take charge of the household. Yet many simply long to separate into a new home, a home which they can feel as their own. The various nuances and circumstances can make all the difference between humility and humiliation. In this context, the *nuse* practices can serve to communicate good intentions and smoothen strained relationships.

## Intermission

### **“Nowadays nothing happens without the hairdresser” (Ep. 10)<sup>14</sup>**

[A Monday morning. At a beauty salon in preparation for the Women’s Day]

On the next morning, Lulije is up early and at seven she is already waiting at the beauty salon in the town nearest to Ilir’s village where his cousin Genciana is a hairdresser. Lulije will have her hair and makeup done once again, this time for the women-only celebration at Ilir’s starting at noon. For almost an hour she watches absentmindedly, as Genciana works on the hair of yet another bride in comfy yoga pants, curling, teasing, and spraying her somewhat thin hair to form it into a voluminous updo. When she is finally done, Lulije takes her place in front of the mirror, while the other bride carefully relocates herself and her three-meter veil onto the leather couch near the door where her brother, who has come to pick her up, soon finds her.

Genciana releases Lulije’s luxurious hair; Lulije is on pins and needles, all her muscles contracted, waiting for Genciana to start teasing and pulling it. The hairdresser is murmuring something about her baby son of whom her mother-in-law is taking care and intersperses this monologue with questions about Lulije’s in-laws, but Lulije can barely hear her because of the noise the hairdryers make.

In two hours Lulije gets new dozens of bobby pins pinned into her scalp, golden eyelids, bright-red lips and a headache – maybe from the sleep deprivation or from the hairdressers’ endless questions about the wedding and the couple’s plans to move to Germany. She is relieved to see Ilir appear at the salon door. With his eyes fixed on the tips of his shoes, he pays for Lulije’s hairdo and makeup and motions her to the car parked in front of the salon.

In the car, away from the female reign that makes him so uncomfortable, Ilir examines Lulije’s emphasized eyebrows. “So? What do you think?”, Lulije cannot make sense of the sparkles in his eyes.

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<sup>14</sup> Donjeta (b. 1997).

“It is startling how different you women look with all these makeups and things,” Ilir says vaguely.

Lulije looks at the selfie she has just made with her phone. The colours are not exactly flattering. Actually, there isn’t much of her natural expression to see because of the thick foundation covering her face. Anyway, Lulije knows all too well that a bride cannot afford to look plain. She sighs and decides to post the selfie in her Instagram profile making sure to tag Genciana and the beauty salon. “Doesn’t Genciana know her stuff? Many thanks for this wonderful bridal look,” the post reads. #nushqiptare #albanianbride #dasma #wedding #kosovo

### ***Dita e grave (Women’s Day): Lulije on display (Ep. 11)***

[At midday on Monday, in front of Ilir’s home.]

After the trip to the hairdresser’s, Lulije dressed with Qëndresa’s help in *dimi* and a *jelek*. Adorned with all her jewelry, she is now standing “like a bride” in front of her new home’s door: her back straight, her arms forming a rhombus, her hands on her belly.

Ilir’s aunts and sisters, who have stayed overnight in Ilir’s home, and the women from the *mahalla* are in the yard. They are singing rhyming verses expressing their delight at having found such a beautiful and industrious *nuse* for Ilir. Two play tambourines while the rest enthusiastically clap their hands.

It is hard to breathe in the August midday heat and despite Qëndresa’s efforts to cool her with a fan, Lulije feels beads of sweat forming on her forehead. Without looking around she feels the women’s eyes piercing her. She pulls her stomach in and strains her calve muscles which hurt after three days of wearing such high heels.

Lulije’s mother, sister, some of her aunts and cousins are seated under the tent and Arta serves them refreshments. The women sing that time has come for Lulije’s *duvak*, the white veil, to be removed. Qëndresa unfastens the bobby pins holding the veil and wraps it around an apple branch held by a prepubescent boy. The boy, a nephew of Ilir’s, dances in circles flourishing the branch with the veil as if it were a war trophy.



*N't'u pastë dokë Iliri i mirë, / çoje dorën preke një lirë* (If you fancy Ilir, raise your hand and touch a gold coin), the women sing. A light smile flickers across Lulije's serious face as she lifts the coin, a gift from her mother-in-law, to display it for everyone to see. The women cheer merrily.

*N't'u pastë dokë Iliri dylber, / çoji dy du'rt për meniherë.* (If you found Ilir handsome, / raise both hands.) Lulije raises her hands reluctantly. She dreads the thought of exposing the wet patches that must have formed on her white shirt.

*Si t'u ngojsh hatrin kunatave / preki grykët e çorapave.* (If you care for your sisters-in-law, / touch the cuffs of your socks). Lulije has no socks on, so Qëndresa prompts her to just touch her ankles. Lulije's legs quiver as she bends forward.

*Si t'u ngojsh hatrin vjehrrive / preki lulet e dimive.* (If you respect your parents-in-law's wishes, / touch the flowers on your *dimi*). Lulije fulfills this request as well. Qëndresa touches Lulije's back to remind her to keep it straight.

*Hajt moj nuse merre një temena / për batër të vjehrrës merre edhe nja.* (Come on, bride, make a *temena* and then one more for your mother-in-law). Lulije's right hand presses lightly her chest, flies to her chin and forehead, then descends in an enticing, rotary motion like an autumn leaf falling from a tree, and halts on her belly. Her left hand mirrors this gesture. The *temena* greeting culminates in a final flight of her hands repeating the same gestures. The women who have read grace, good will and skill in Lulije's motions, respond with fervent applause and shouts of *mashallah*. Facing her mother-in-law, Lulije performs a second *temena* and Qëndresa takes her by the arm and leads her into the house to change into her velvet *dallam* embroidered with golden flowers.

## Chapter 5.

### “Lulije sees after us”<sup>15</sup>

A young married woman is expected to persevere in three types of labour: household work, childrearing and welcoming guests. Ideally, she works her way out of her liminality through daily caring labour. A young married woman who shows zeal in these duties, will be praised by her affinal relatives and especially her mother-in-law. In this chapter I focus on *hyzmet* or serving, and only briefly touch on other household duties to give an idea of a recent married woman’s everyday life. I also reflect on the role of the visits to the parental home where women go not only to see their families but also to rest from their everyday work. Lulije’s story illustrates how a woman is ceremonially initiated into the serving of tea and housecleaning which are her responsibilities in the new household.

### Serving her first tea to her in-laws (Ep. 12)

[Monday, in the late afternoon. At Ilir’s home]

Lulije, in her beige glittering dress and high-heeled slippers, stands in the middle of the crowded living room. The entire *maballa* has gathered at Ilir’s home.

Lulije’s in-laws have already greeted the guests, and now it is Lulije’s turn. Lulije breathes in and turns to Ilir’s grandfather, the first among the dozen men, seated near the big TV screen.

“How are you, grandfather? Are you feeling well? How is grandmother doing? How about your sons, daughters-in-law and daughters? And your grandsons and granddaughters?” Lulije chirps. To all these questions, the old man answers with *mirë, mirë* (good, good) and then reciprocates with inquiries about Ilir’s, her parents’ and her own wellbeing and health. “Are you having a good time with us?” he concludes with a smile. “*Patjetër*, of course,” she is reassured by the warm notes in the old man’s voice and proceeds to greet Ilir’s uncles and cousins. Qëndresa, who stands next to Lulije, explains in a whisper how everyone is related

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<sup>15</sup> From the song *Jena motra kallabllak*. The lyrics say: “We are a crowd of sisters, Lulije sees after us”.

to their family. Now Lulije turns to the women who are sitting on the couches nearer to the kitchen area. When they reach aunt Bukurie, Qëndresa summarizes her tragic fate as the widow of a *dëshmor*, a martyr, as they commonly refer to soldiers killed in the last war. As it is now Behare's second daughter-in-law's turn, Lulije remembers that Qëndresa has forewarned her to not ask this woman about her children because she does not have any. "Everything is running smoothly," Lulije congratulates herself on the successfully managed hurdles.

Iilir's second sister, Fatmire, is pouring *çaj rusi*, Russian tea, as they call the black tea, into small Turkish glasses. She has already cut wedges of lemon in a small bowl and has filled a couple of bowls with peanuts and crackers. Lulije joins her in the kitchen area. "This one is for grandpa, he likes his tea very strong," Fatmire instructs her. Lulije skillfully balances half a dozen glasses on a tray despite the crinoline and the high-heeled slippers. She serves the tea starting with the oldest men: first Iilir's grandfather, then his uncles, his father and so on. "Is my décolleté too revealing?" a thought flashes through Lulije's mind as she bends to leave a tea glass in front of one of Iilir's uncles, but she brushes it off right away; after all, it was Mihane who chose this dress and asked her to wear it tonight.

"This one is for mom. See, it needs to be that weak. Auntie Safete however drinks average tea with only one teaspoon of sugar," Fatmire continues with the clarifications. Lulije lets the instructions sink into her memory. She knows that remembering people's preferences for food and drink is a must if she wants to be fluent in the language of respect.

Having served the women, Lulije pours orange juice for the children seated on mattresses on the floor. She has just filled the last child's glass, when the grandfather clinks his empty glass against the saucer to attract her attention to the fact that he has finished drinking his tea and wants another one.

While Lulije distributes the second round of teas, the murmuring of the women in the room turns into a loud chatter. The men have also shed their solemn faces. Gulping peanuts, they discuss the arrival of a couple of *gurbetqarë*, migrants, and possible coalition combinations in the future government. Iilir is chatting casually with one of his cousins. The children have started quarreling about the few remaining crackers with poppy seed, their favourites.

While passing by the women, Lulije hears fragments of their conversations. Ariona is showing short videos from the recent festivities. The couple's solemn entrance and Lulije's performance of traditional dances at the wedding banquet are highly praised. "She dances exactly as a bride should, *tamam si nuse*," Behare exclaims watching a video of Lulije in *dallam* dancing slowly, face-to-face with her mother-in-law. Mihane nods; she is very proud of Lulije's impeccable behaviour and dancing skills. A video of Qëndresa's youngest daughter making dance steps next to her mother melts the women's hearts. "Oh, the little sweetheart, *loçka e vogël*?"

"I don't want any more," one of Ilir's uncles declares after his third glass of tea. Lulije politely offers one more glass of tea, as etiquette requires, but he refuses and puts a ten-euro bill on her tray, because she had served him *sejfe*, for the first time. A couple of other men and women follow his lead also leaving small bills. Lulije brings the tray with empty glasses to the kitchen countertop and from this safe spot steals a glance at Ilir. He raises his head from his phone. Their looks meet for a split second, but it is enough for Lulije to notice how pleased he is with his apt young wife.

## Welcoming guests

A contemporary *nuse* is an official representative of her new family, a public relations envoy of sorts – at celebrations, as described in Chapter 4 – but also when someone comes to visit. In the past, the prevailing gender segregation meant that male guests – often strangers – were not served by women but by the male hosts in the sitting room (*oda*) where men ate and spent their leisure time. Men prepared and served coffee, while women brought the food and left it in front of the door (Reineck 1991: 57-58; Backer 2015 [1979]: 103; Hasluck 1954: 28-29). Young married women served only in the closest family circle. They poured water for hand washing, offered a towel, set the table, brought anything needed like fresh water and then cleared the table and cleaned the crumbs around. The idea that welcoming guests is primarily a *nuse*'s responsibility seems to have developed in the last several decades as gender segregation loosened, and a lot of the men's socializing moved out of the home to coffeehouses and restaurants. Nowadays the visitors in one's home are almost always relatives and friends, not strangers.

How a family greets visitors and what refreshments they offer depends on how often the visitors frequent the hosts' house – the more distant the connection and rarer the visits, the more elaborate the protocol and the greater the number of refreshments offered (see also Sugarman 1997: 137-138). In the villages around the town of Lipjan, a prolonged visit of guests who do not come often proceeds as follows. After the guests are seated, each member of the host family greets each visitor asking them how they and their close relatives are. Then the *nuse*, if there is one in the family, offers fruit juice or a soft drink. A good *nuse* will then approach the visitors and ask them again (*me folë për së dyti*) how they are doing, lingering longer around the female guests and inquiring about any health problems she has heard about, congratulating or extending condolences, if there has been a joyous occasion or a sad incident in the visitor's family. Next the *nuse* will serve Turkish coffee, and soon after that she will put on the kettle for tea. She will serve several rounds of it, in small Turkish glasses, until the guests declare they have had enough. Next come a piece of cake and seasonal fruits. At the end of the visit, the hosts will walk the guests to the cemented patio where they have left their shoes. At some point during the visit the *nuse* has tidied the shoes and now she will help older women or fellow dressed-up *nuse* find their pair and put them on. After the guests' departure, the *nuse* will immediately wash and wipe dry the cups and glasses, so that they are ready for new visitors who could show up any moment unannounced, especially if they live next door.

Welcoming guests requires a set of almost invisible techniques and skills, as well as a mental and embodied state of constant preparedness and attention to detail with which a *nuse* expresses her respect to her in-laws and any guests. I have been welcomed many times by young married women and have followed with awe their sophisticated gestures. No awkward pauses occur in their greetings and nothing gets spilled; the cup of coffee, glass of tea or piece of cake inconspicuously emerge in front of the guest as if brought by a fairy. I could have remained oblivious to the minutiae in the role of the hostess, if it were not for my own efforts to perform it. As I stumbled when enumerating sons, daughters and daughters-in-law in customary greetings, as I struggled to prepare black tea of just the exact strength, as I routinely overlooked the empty glass of a guest who had finished with their tea or forgot whom each of the empty glasses belonged to, it came to me that *hyzmet* (serving) was more a body technique (as per Mauss 1973) than just a tradition or a habit. The following “everyday snippet”

poetically expresses the details of *hyzmet* when serving tea, a drink consumed daily within the family or with visitors and usually served by a *nuse*:

### **a dozen glasses of tea**

her mind knows  
who everyone is,  
how everyone likes their tea,  
how to honour grey hairs and beards

her hands know how  
to cut the lemon  
in perfect wedges,  
not to spill  
a single crystal of sugar

her fingers know  
how the burns of the lighter,  
of the kettle,  
of the steam feel,  
and how to escape them

her eyes know  
all the shades of amber

her hands know how  
to pour evenly,  
to hold firmly

her mouth knows how  
to drink swiftly,  
to ask politely,  
to reply briefly

until the sound of an empty glass  
makes her jump to her feet

as her ears know  
that is the signal for the next round  
of brewing, filling and offering  
of a dozen glasses of tea

All this is a result of years of socialization: most of my interviewees were used to seeing and doing *hyzmet* since childhood. “We have learned it. If you lived here, if you had grown up here, you would have picked it up as well,” Donjeta (b. 1997) said with a warm smile, when I expressed my amazement with her ease at *hyzmet*. Donjeta went on to tell me about an uncle who had married a Czech bride. The Czech woman, like me, also marveled at Kosovo women’s skills. “Now, she is like a butterfly, more agile than all of us,” Donjeta exclaimed and clapped her hands. “She comes for the second round of polite phrases, talks to the guests with ease, serves them coffee, tea, everything...” Surely, Donjeta wanted to reassure me that I could learn to do all that too, if I wanted to,

and gave the example of the Czech woman as an illustration that it was the desire to learn that mattered. Not everyone comes to *hyzmet* as well prepared as Donjeta – and some women have to catch up at the beginning of their married lives. Melodi (b. 1991), for example, told me she initially struggled a little with the serving part; as the youngest among her siblings, it was mostly her brothers' wives who had served in her parental home.

There is another twist to the *nuse* ceremonial of serving. As with greetings, a *nuse* has to observe a hierarchy which gives priority to elders, men and guests. Thus, when distributing refreshments, she is expected to start with the oldest man and to give children their share last. "So, should I serve first an elderly woman or her son?" I tried to clarify with my in-laws. "Should I give priority to my mother-in-law or to a younger female guest?" I never got clear-cut instructions; as long as a *nuse* adheres to the basic principle of order, she has some choice over the serving order of people with more ambiguous constellations of statuses. When I asked Donjeta (b. 1997) whether she knew the right order in which she was to serve her new family and their visitors, she exclaimed that of course she did. "Even if there were a hundred people to serve, I would know how," she said confidently.

The title of this chapter leans on a wedding song which says that even though a crowd of sisters go to visit their parental home, the *nuse* tirelessly and happily wait on them all. While Melodi needed time to get used to performing *hyzmet*, she also said that when her husband's sisters came to visit and she served them and they stayed up until late, they had a really good time. Thus, *hyzmet* is not seen as degrading or unpleasant in itself but is an experience which, similar to dressing up, is shared by young married women, and it helps forge their bond. Through the regular visits of relatives and neighbours, one's skill in welcoming guests and preparing a good Turkish coffee becomes public knowledge. Considering how these skills are valorized and that many mothers-in-law take pride in their daughters-in-law's *nuse* skills, it makes perfect sense that many *nuse* strive to excel at them.

Melodi (b. 1991) reminisced about the time when she and M. were engaged and could go out "without obligations." I suggested that probably it was the birth of her son that changed that, and Melodi agreed, but she added *hyzmet* as another responsibility that tied her to the home and took away the delight of outings with M. After the wedding,

when she and her husband would go out to spend time together, at any time they could expect a call from her in-laws asking them to return as soon as possible because guests have come and the *nuse* has to serve them. Kadire (b.1998) also described the burden of having to always be present and available to serve. She said that while at her mother's she did not need to even show up when guests came by if she did not feel like it, at her new home, it would cause a commotion if she did not welcome the guests. "The *nuse* was at home and did not come to us, did not greet us... What is wrong with her?" Kadire said mimicking the reactions of female visitors.

## A fortunate house<sup>16</sup> (Ep. 13)

[On Tuesday, early in the morning. At Ilir's home.]

The alarm rings at five. The dawn light is filtering through the blinds. Lulije jumps out of bed and pulls the blinds up. Ilir turns to the other side and snorts something in his sleep. Lulije prepares a plain, long dress, underwear, her toiletry bag and a towel and, with all this under her arms, tiptoes out of the room and to the bathroom.

Lulije comes back dressed and with her hair wrapped in a towel turban. Under the light of the rising sun, Lulije applies makeup – foundation, mascara, light eyeshadows, lipstick; she concentrates her efforts on masking the dark circles under her eyes. Then she puts on plainer earrings, the golden coin from her mother-in-law and a couple of rings and bracelets. She lightly touches Ilir's hand. "I am sorry, honey, I have to dry my hair a bit."

"Oh women," Ilir growls and covers his head with the quilt.

Lulije dries her long hair with the hairdryer while texting her sister with her free hand. Should she wait for her mother-in-law to knock on the door, or go out and start cleaning the

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<sup>16</sup> Alluding to the following verse sung by women at *dita e grave*: *E lumja mori shpi / gjithë e para ki m'u fshi. / E lumja ti mori derë, / gjithë e para ki mu çelë.* (Oh, you, fortunate house, / you will be always the one to be cleaned first. / Oh, you, fortunate door, / you will be always the one to be opened first.)



yard on her own? Krenare recommends the former. “Then the coffee. And don’t forget to greet Mihane and Ariona with *marrje e dorës*,” she instructs her.

“Maybe getting up at five was a bit of an overkill,” thinks Lulije, sitting on the bed, when Mihane finally knocks on the door at seven. Lulije with her high-heeled slippers in her hand gently closes the door after her.

When, two hours later, Ilir slowly descends to the living room rubbing his eyes, he finds her preparing breakfast with his mother. Before that Lulije has swept and washed the patio in front of the house and prepared and served sweet Turkish coffee for everyone. Ilir’s mother is glowing.

“Lulije prepares the best coffee in the world, doesn’t she?” she says to Ilir.

“*Të bëftë mirë, nanë* / Enjoy it, mother,”<sup>17</sup> Lulije says lowering her eyes to hide her triumph.

## Household chores

A recently married woman can expect that she will be assigned certain tasks and her mother-in-law will take up others. Some of these tasks can be traced back to the *zadruga*-type household and its labour division (Hasluck 1954: 25-28, 39). In Donjeta’s (b. 1997) new family, she usually does the cleaning, the serving and the dishes, whereas her mother-in-law bakes the bread and cooks the meals. The two of them share the care of Donjeta’s baby. Newly married Kadire (b. 1998), who at the time of the interview still lived with her in-laws, was responsible for cleaning and serving, while her mother-in-law cooked and took care of the hens. At Nazmije’s (b. 1993) the household chores are similarly divided. Each morning Nazmije tidies, dusts, and washes the floors, cleans the bathroom, serves coffee to her in-laws, she also washes all the dishes, helps with the salad, sets and clears the table, and then prepares and serves the tea, whereas her mother-in-law is in charge of the cooking. While the young women had helped their mothers with some household chores before getting married, they were more involved with these responsibilities once they married. Kadire (b. 1998) explained that, when she lived with her parents, she was not rushed with the cleaning, whereas at her in-laws’ she

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<sup>17</sup> Literally “I hope it does you good”. This Albanian phrase may be used either before or after food or drink has been consumed.

felt cleaning had to be done with some urgency and under pressure. Backer (2015 [1979]: 67) noticed, and my observations corroborate it, that women in rural Kosovo spend a lot of time cleaning. As illustrated by my interviewees' accounts, a recent *nuse's* daily chores include vacuuming the common and her own rooms, dusting the furniture, sweeping and washing the cemented patio in front of the house and, in summer and fall, gathering the fallen leaves and fruits in the garden. She needs to do that before noon because visitors may come by for tea in the afternoon. When she is done, her mother-in-law might ask her to dress up nicely and either wait for guests or go visit someone.

A task few young women perform at the beginning of their marriages is cooking. Cooking was and continues to be seen as belonging to the next level of household expertise (Reineck 1991: 98). Some of my interviewees did not prepare meals the first several years of their marriages, in Remzije's (b. 1964) and Nazmije's (b. 1993) cases it was as many as five years; whereas others said they began cooking within a few months. Hanife (b. 1944) told me that she had a sleepless night when after only two months of marriage her in-laws told her that from the next day she would be cooking. Some women started cooking on their own initiative out of pity for their elderly mothers-in-law or because they had learned to cook in their parental homes. Some mothers-in-law also showed care and support for their daughters-in-law by exempting them from cooking, especially if they had a difficult pregnancy or a young child.

## **Effort is what counts**

Women's comments and my personal experiences show that in-laws are seldom concerned with a *nuse's* lack of skills. Making efforts to learn and showing enthusiasm is what matters. Hanife (b. 1944), who until her marriage had been in charge of her parental family's livestock, had no idea how to do housework. However, she was a fast learner; looking at other women's work, she soon caught up with cooking, washing, serving and everything else her in-laws expected of her. "I was up all the time, never rested," Hanife says emphasizing her zeal at several points of her account. Her in-laws did not spare their praise for her and always took her to as many celebrations as possible, which seems to have been and to still be a sign of being in one's relatives' good graces. Middle-aged and elderly women were often eager to describe their young selves as tireless, nimble, and diligent (Hanife b. 1944, Zymrije b. 1961, Fatime b. 1962), and some of them (like Zymrije) felt it was something the younger generations lacked. A

*nuse* who does not volunteer to prepare a coffee for her mother-in-law, according to the women picnicking at the spa, or one who continues to simply ask “how is your family?” instead of trying to remember more details about a visitor’s family situation, according to Donjeta (b. 1997), or one who several years into her marriage stops caring about *hyzmet* are seen as lacking respect for others and for tradition.

I had not noticed the dozens of cigarette butts littering the grass in the garden before heavily pregnant Rinesa (b. 1993) started picking them up one by one in her cupped hand. I joined her in this task, at the same time feeling annoyed with the smokers who did not use an ashtray, although it would be Rinesa with her huge pregnant belly who would be bending over to pick them up. Rinesa would surely read this occurrence differently. She would say that it gives her pleasure to do it, that “she is not too lazy to do it” (*nuk pritoj*) as she told me every time I tried to prevent her from getting up to bring me something. Her effervescence in overdoing her duties stems from how she interprets tradition, her role, respect and love.

## **Women’s visits to their natal homes**

Contemporary women tend to visit their parental homes much more often than their mothers or grandmothers did. It is a result of improved transportation infrastructure as well as a laxer attitude of their in-laws and the lesser amount of work they perform at their husband’s homes. Melodi (b. 1991) spends almost every weekend at her parental home, especially when her mother or brothers who live abroad are in Kosovo. Rinesa (b. 1992) also visits her parents every week or every second week, particularly in the summer, the busiest time for her husband who has a side job as a DJ at weddings. Liria (b. 1990) aims to go to her father’s once in two or three weeks, but sometimes she cannot because all her sisters-in-law live abroad, and she alone takes care of the household and her elderly and infirm mother-in-law.

The visits to a *nuse*’s parental home are even instituted by customary law as a married woman’s right (Hasluck 1954: 31; Gjeçovi 1989 [1933]: Article 37, Clause 101). According to customary law, property is passed only to sons (Reineck 1991: 46), and a woman’s inheritance is construed as the right to an open door to her former home and to protection by her brothers (Gajraku & Canolli 2017: 9-10). Thus, although their right to equal inheritance is guaranteed by Kosovo’s constitution, many women are still reluctant

to even bring up the issue, because they fear that their relations with their brothers will sour and they would no longer be welcome in their natal homes (Vuniqi & Halimi 2011: 40; KNSPR 2016: 162). Various media reports say that just 17% of all Kosovo women own property, and barely 4% have inherited property from their parents (see Image 2 in Appendix E). In an interview about women's inheritance in one of the recent oral history projects, a female interviewee, born in 1930, explains:

Even if he had many acres of land, I would not take my share of it. Why should I fall out with him and stop seeing and being with my brother? Let's say I am sad at my husband's house. I can go and stay with my brother for one week or two weeks (cited in Gajraku & Canolli 2017: 19/119).

Women's visits at their parental homes usually last several days and are an emotional highlight for them. Often women bring the children with them, so that they too develop relationships with their maternal kin (*dajë*). My interlocutors tended to see the frequency of the visits to their parental homes as crucial for a positive marital experience and their relationship with their in-laws. Some elderly and middle-aged women noted with resigned sigh that they had been deprived of frequent visits, either due to their domestic obligations or to their in-laws' whims. My interlocutors treasured these visits not only because they provided an opportunity to see their parents or siblings, but also because their parental home was for them a space of spontaneity and repose. *Te nana* ('at Mother's') or *në opçinë* ('at the parental family home') the married woman can sleep in, be idle, and wear whatever pleases her. The contrast between the *bijë* (daughter) and the *nuse* experiences is stark. Once, when visiting a distant relative of my husband's, we were politely served by the recent *nuse* – a young, pregnant woman in a long dress, with carefully styled hair and makeup, while the daughter of the house joined us on the couch in ragged sweatpants. Most women said that at their in-laws', they felt less free, somewhat awkward and anxious, especially at the beginning of their marriage, when their actions, behaviours and appearance were constantly scrutinized and evaluated. By contrast, my interlocutors of all generations associated visits to their parental homes with hearty conversations, jokes, spontaneity. Melodi (b. 1991) said that at her mother's she sits comfortably, and she laughs and talks freely ("in place and out of place"). I remember those cozy late evenings when my husband's sisters have put their unruly children to sleep on the couches and thin mattresses on the floor of the sitting room, and we eat sunflower seeds on the porch and drink herbal tea, and they talk, mostly about the past or about something funny someone has said. It feels as if such visits are like an

umbilical cord to warmth and safety for many Kosovo women, a day off in their routines which are slowly wearing them down, a safety valve to release the pressure built up in their efforts to fit in and to please their in-laws, a time slightly subversive because of its lack of structure.

## **A different kind of morning (Ep. 14)**

[Two months after the wedding. A Saturday morning at Lulije's parents' home]

“Shh, mommy and auntie are still asleep,” Halime shushes to Krenare's son who is up and fussing in search of his toy helicopter. Half-awake on the sofa bed in the living room, Lulije catches a whiff of coffee and freshly baked *pite* and the sound of her mother's steps. She hears her sister-in-law sweeping the yard. On the other couch, Krenare and her eldest daughter, Era, are still asleep, Lulije discovers when she reluctantly opens her eyes. Krenare's youngest daughter is sitting on the ground, trying to slip on her shirt.

The sisters arrived yesterday together; Krenare's husband picked up Lulije from home. Since Ilir's departure for Germany shortly after the wedding, Lulije has visited her parents several times. Her in-laws do not mind. Lulije and Krenare stayed up until two in the morning recalling Lulije's wedding and swapping funny family stories. Lulije showed Krenare videos from the *syneti*, the feast for the circumcision of two of Shqipe's sons. The sisters giggled at Lulije's experiences as a newly married woman and the odd ways of her new home.

“Imagine, they bake their *pite* without the upper pastry layer and, when you eat it, everything falls out.” Lulije told Krenare funny stories about Shqipe's boys, who adore her, and praised Mihane's kind attitude. “You are lucky,” Krenare sighed; the relationship with her in-laws was not an easy one.

Half an hour later, the sisters, still in their pajamas, drink coffee with their brother Ermal and make plans to visit an aunt in the afternoon while Ermal's wife folds up the sofas.

## **“Women's hands are different”**

A popular song, which is sometimes used as the background soundtrack of henna-night videos, calls girls and women “a balm for everyone's soul” (*Për vajzën*). The video clip shows several young girls tidying, feeding their toddler brother, and doing

*hyzmet* – clearly it is through carrying for others that they become a balm for everyone’s soul – while their father remembers with embarrassment his disappointment when his wife gave birth to girl after girl instead of the so cherished boy. The song aims to emphasize the value of women by showing that they have essential skills and qualities. I encountered similar sentiments among some of my research participants. Rinesa (b.1992) perceives her husband as inherently incapable of doing “women’s work”; for example, he would never do dishes or clean.

“[...] And honestly, I don’t want him to. Because men do things differently than women. When I do something, I do it by myself and I don’t want someone else to meddle in my work. Women’s hands are different.”

This gendered division of labour is informed, in part, by essentialist views which consider certain skills “natural” for women and others for men. Rinesa understands love and being a woman as engagement in complementary and dedicated labour. Fatime (b. 1962) and Donjeta (b. 1997) after a lively discussion agreed that “women have always been stronger than men”, “the roof of the house.” “What can a man ever do without a woman?” Fatime exclaimed. “Nothing at all. He cannot even cook for himself or wash his own clothes,” young Donjeta replied. My remark that both Donjeta’s and my own husband seemed to be managing perfectly fine without us when abroad, fell on deaf ears. Paradoxically, the differentiation from men through caring labour casts women as strong, precious, and irreplaceable – at least from the women’s point of view. While such a perspective clearly made some women feel good about themselves and not act or feel as though they were victims, the same beliefs impede women from pursuing careers as they imply that women belong at home, with the children and in the kitchen. Women who do pursue careers – more than half of my younger interviewees did so or had such plans – strive to combine their studies, training or work with family life. The negotiation of this situation is difficult and adds to a myriad of other impediments to women’s economic independence, such as the difficulty to commute to the workplace or the widespread nepotism preventing people “without connections” from finding employment. Many women, mindful of their “family obligations” would avoid jobs which require them to stay away from home for long hours. Melodi’s (b. 1991) case comes to mind. When their son was about two years old, her husband encouraged her to go back to school which she had to leave when she married and soon after that fell pregnant. However, he insisted she needed to become a preschool teacher because she would only be away for two

hours a day and thus this job would clearly accommodate her family obligations better than her dream to open a driving school.

## Intermission

### Any news to report? (Ep. 15)

[Six months after the wedding. Ilir is in Germany after several weeks at home for New Year. The women have gathered for afternoon tea at Safete's]

Despite the foggy, cold weather, Mihane and Lulije have come to Safete's for tea and to pick up the gas cylinder which Safete's son has refilled at the gas station. As usual, Safete turns down the two-euro coin that Mihane wants to press in her hand. "This is the least we can do for you. You have done so much for us and now..." Safete's voice trembles with indignation.

Ilir's father, Ali, is a long-distance truck driver and normally spends the entire week away. Thus, the three women in his household are dependent on the young men in the *maballa* for anything they need from the nearby town: buying groceries, going to the doctor or filling that propane cylinder for the stove.

Absorbed in this negotiation of generosity, Safete and Mihane do not seem to hear Arta's baby incessant squalling from the other room. Arta hectically lights the gas burner. Whoosh. She puts on the double kettle and starts adding sugar to the glasses.

"Let me serve the tea today," Lulije has left her spot on the couch. Arta nods with gratitude and runs to check on her baby daughter.

"Oh, I almost forgot! Here are some baby clothes from Fatmire's daughters," Mihane announces and hands to Safete a plastic bag full of baby long-sleeve tops, fleece pajamas and rompers. "Mostly winter clothes, all of them washed." Triumphant, she produces a pale pink coat from the bag. "Look at this one. It is for a three-month old and has a matching cap."

"Oh, there is a warm blanket as well," Safete spreads out the clothes on the couch. "Eh, our children did not grow up with such nice clothes..." She admires the soft textile, the pastel colours. "I don't get it why on earth are young women complaining all the time how difficult it is to raise children. It is a piece of cake, with all the diapers, clothes, strollers... Nowadays,



one could easily raise ten children,” Safete declares. Arta, rocking her baby to sleep, shrinks in the corner.

Mihane nods. The two women recollect their youth when they had to sew the majority of their children’s clothes on old sewing machines. Safete’s musings about her oldest son’s first pair of jeans are interrupted by Behare who after an abrupt knock enters the living room, accompanied by her daughter-in-law, Flutura.

“Look, look. Who would have thought that you would gather for tea and not invite us?” Safete opens her mouth to plead her innocence, but Behare’s laughing eyes give her away. “Oh my, Lulije is serving the tea tonight. Has Arta retired?” Behare seems to be in an unusually perky mood.

“Isn’t Shqipe back home yet? I brought her the phone charger back,” Flutura leaves on the table the charger she has borrowed a couple of days ago. Shqipe is visiting her parents for the weekend. She has taken the boys with her and the house is unusually quiet.

After the two women are seated, greeted and served tea, Behare turns to Lulije. “So, *nuse*, how are you doing? Do you have any news to report?” Lulije bows her head and fixes her eyes on the rich blue of her dress. She knows what this question means... “Everyone wants better conditions, a new house... But one should not wait too long...,” Behare continues.

Lulije squeezes her hands until her knuckles become white but with a smile as calm as glass she replies that there is plenty of time and takes Safete’s and Mihane’s glasses to refill them.

## Conclusion

This thesis presents an ethnographic account of the experience of getting married in present-day rural Kosovo. The heavy makeup, the bridal frills, the repetitive greetings, all those dazzling and dizzying details tell the intertangled stories of people building relationships with one another. I hope that with it I have shed light on the bridal material culture and *nuse* practices such as dressing up and serving guests as blocks of this relationship building.

In the last decades, matters of everyday and ritual life of Kosovo Albanians have been ousted from scholarly attention by issues of great social relevance such as the consequences of the 1998-1999 war, or corruption, topics which the many NGOs operating in the country have explored. The previous writing which engages more specifically with the *nuse* and marriage practices of rural women in Kosovo is Reineck's 1991 PhD thesis based on her fieldwork in the 1980s. Much has changed since then, and my work illustrates how getting married in rural Kosovo feels and looks like in the recent years.

While my account pays attention to the variation in *nuse* experiences, my inquiries were by necessity formulated in line with the ubiquitous local prescriptive definitions of how a *nuse* ought to look and behave – or the “rules”. Women articulate those “rules” in very uniform terms, but adhere to them to different degrees – while after years of marriage Erblina (b. 1994) “takes” her mother-in-law's hand every morning and never wears casual clothes at her in-laws home, Kadire (b. 1998) does not own the typical *nuse* clothing and has not performed *marrje e dorës* since the day she came to her husband's home. I have tried to formulate both the “rules” and how women interpret and negotiate them. My research is not meant to represent the experiences of all Kosovo Albanian women. Had I engaged with single women or more women who study or work full-time and live in cities, especially the capital city Prishtina, or abroad, the thesis would surely have looked somewhat different.

The combined performance-practice prism elaborated in Chapter 2 has helped to elucidate a major question to which I kept returning, namely: why and in what way the *nuse* appearances are collective. The notions of teamwork, negotiation and display

reveal the many ways in which a woman's in-laws participate in the making of her appearance, as well as her other *nuse* performances.

My thesis includes many threads open to further exploration, as for example, the diaspora's relationship to the weddings. The wedding season is in July and August – the months when Kosovo Albanians living abroad come for their annual leaves and can celebrate their own joyful occasions or attend others' feasts. Donjeta told me that the time of her engagement feast was carefully chosen so that her husband's uncles who reside in Germany could join them. "So that they can also enjoy it, [...] because they are homesick", she explained. Wedding celebrations maintain the emotional ties of migrants to their homeland (Kadriu 2017: 27). The bridal businesses, their connection to Kosovo women's traditional crafts and to the rituals and spaces which women frequent is another theme that briefly comes up in Lulije's story and would be an interesting direction of further exploration. Another wedding-related theme I touched upon in this thesis that needs further elaboration and analysis are the experiences of pious Muslim women. I was impressed with Kadire's (b. 1998) conscious efforts to resist almost every aspect of the customs, expectations, and values related to *nuse*, as expressed by both older and younger women. Kadire's views are not representative of all Muslim believers in Kosovo. As it often is the case, there is a spectrum of beliefs that are coloured by the personalities of their holders. An ethnography looking at how pious Kosovo marrying/ed women navigate the mainstream rural cultural demands described in this thesis, which practices they choose to resist and why, would be another worthy undertaking.

Despite my many conversations with middle-aged and elderly women, the question how *nuse* practices have changed since Reineck's observations in the 1980s proved to need more research and perhaps a greater historical distance. The material basis and living standards in the villages have vastly improved and, judging by the sudden decline of the themes of shame (*marre*) and especially fear (*tut*) in younger women's accounts, the overtly oppressive aspects of the experience have disappeared. But it is difficult to pinpoint tendencies, to determine their timelines and the factors that contributed to them. For instance, it seemed that being a *nuse* has become more about dressing up, but then again there are women like Remzije (b. 1964) who thought that, compared to her and her peers, present-day younger women were "lazy" to dress up.

Looking back at my work on this project, my approach to understanding how one becomes a Kosovo nuse reminds me of peeling onion skins. I start with the outer layers – the most visible and verbalized aspects – material culture, the expectations and rules which local people can easily formulate. But a thesis about them alone would be somewhat superficial and would do justice neither to my interviewees' experiences, nor to my own. Thus, I make my way to the core – women's collective and embodied experiences surrounding weddings and marriage in rural Kosovo. Negotiations, contradictions, nuances, incompleteness, uncertainties emerge at this point, as well as the need for emotive registers that depart from the dry prose of a report and near translation, conversation, and storytelling stemming from experience (Benjamin 2019 [1968]).

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<sup>18</sup> Bulgarian and Russian which use the Cyrillic alphabet are transliterated according to the Library of Congress transliteration system.

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## **Appendix A.**

### **Interviewees: bios and circumstances of the interview**

#### **Nuse-cohort**

Ardita (b. 1993). Married. Mother of two infant children. Elementary schoolteacher employed at the school in the village where she is married. Rural residence. Interview conducted in July 2019 at her home; her husband was out of hearing distance taking care of the children.

Donjeta (b. 1997). Married. Mother of an infant child. Housewife. Lived in a village at the time of the interview, meanwhile she has left Kosovo to join her husband abroad. Interview conducted in July 2019 at Donjeta's home in the presence of her own and my mothers-in-law.

Erbliina (b. 1994). Married. Housewife. At the time of the interview Erbliina was expecting to join her husband who is working abroad. Rural residence. One-on-one interview conducted in July 2019 at the home of a relative of mine.

Erdeta (b. 1989). Married. Erdeta has an undergraduate degree in sociology and for a short time managed a clothing business. At the time of the interview, she was taking care of an infant child. She lives in a village near her natal town. One-on-one interview conducted in August 2019 at her parental home.

Erina (b. 1993). Married. Mother of a young child. At the time of the interview, she hoped to have her temporary contract as a primary school teacher extended. Lives in a city. Interview conducted one-on-one at her parental home.

Erza (b. 1995). Married. At the time of the interview Erza was pregnant and meanwhile she became a mom. Erza is a hairdresser and makeup artist in a salon located in a town nearby town. She took a short break from work for the birth of her first child. Erza lives in a village in the suburbs of a city and drives daily to work. Interview conducted in July 2019 at Erza's parental home in the presence of family members.

Fjolla (b. 1990). Married. Mother of two young children. At the time of the interview, Fjolla, a kindergarten teacher, had been for some time looking for work. Lives in a village, very close to a city. Interview conducted in July 2019 at the home of a relative of mine, one-on-one.

Hana (b. 1997). Married. At the time of the interview, she had a toddler and meanwhile she gave birth to a second child. Housewife. Rural residence. Interview conducted in July 2019 at her parental home in the presence of family members.

Kadire (b. 1998). Married. At the time of the interview, Kadire, who had been married for a month, lived with her in-laws. She was finishing her studies and expressed a desire to start working as soon as possible. Meanwhile she and her husband found work in the city and moved there. Interview conducted in August 2019 at her home, one-on-one.

Linda (b. 1996). Married. At the time of the interview, she was not working because she had an infant child to take care of. Linda is a kindergarten teacher and had worked in a private kindergarten for three years. Lives in a city. Interview conducted in July 2019. A significantly shorter interview compared to others, because we talked at the hairdresser's, in the presence of the hairdressers and other customers. This is the only interview which was not audio-recorded.

Liria (b. 1990). Married. At the time of the interview pregnant with her second child, currently expecting her third. Housewife. Rural residence. Interview conducted at my in-law's where she and some of her female relatives came to visit. We talked in a separate room; my seven-year-old niece was present.

Melodi (b. 1991). Married. Mother of a preschooler. At the time of the interview, she was studying to become a kindergarten teacher. Rural residence; drove one day a week to a town for her studies. Interview conducted one-on-one at her college.

Nazmije (b. 1993). Married. Mother of a young child. Housewife. Before getting married she worked briefly as a salesperson. Rural residence. Interview conducted one-on-one at her parental home.

Rinesa (b. 1992). She got divorced after a couple months of marriage, and shortly thereafter met and got married to her current husband. She was heavily pregnant during

our interview and shortly thereafter gave birth to her first child. Housewife. Rural residence. Interview conducted in July 2019 at her home, one-on-one.

## **Middle-aged and elderly women**

Fatime (b. 1962). Widowed. Mother of four. Housewife. Rural residence. Interview conducted in August 2019 at her home, one-on-one, several follow-up conversations throughout 2020.

Feride (b. 1967). Married for the second time after a brief first marriage. Mother of six children; the oldest grown-up, the youngest in their teenage years. Housewife. Rural residence. Interview conducted in July 2019 in the presence of other family members.

Ganimete (b. 1952). Married. Mother of three. Works as a janitor at a school. Originally from a village but moved to a city several years after she got married. One-on-one interview conducted in July 2019.

Hamide (b. 1963). Married. Mother of four. Housewife. Urban residence. Interview conducted in July 2019 in the presence of a close friend of hers.

Hanife (b. 1944). Widowed. Mother of six. Housewife. Rural residence. Interview conducted in July 2019; her daughter-in-law and my mother-in-law were present.

Hatixhe (b. 1943). Married. Mother of seven. Housewife. Spends most of the year abroad. Interview conducted in August 2019; other family members and my mother-in-law were present.

Lila (b. 1963). Married. Mother of three. Housewife and a long-time teacher of Albanian language and literature. Originally from a village but moved to a city several years after she got married. Interview conducted in July 2019, partly one-on-one and partly in the presence of a close friend and colleagues of hers.

Rahime (b. 1952). Widowed. Mother of seven. Housewife. Rural residence. Interview conducted in July 2019 in my mother-in-law's presence.

Remzije (b. 1964). At the time of the interview married, meanwhile her husband has passed away. Mother of four. Housewife. Rural residence. Interview conducted in July 2019; her eleven-year-old granddaughter was present.

Rifadije (b. 1942). Married. Mother of seven. Housewife. Rural residence. Interview conducted in July 2019; my mother-in-law was present.

Shaha (b. 1976). Married. Mother of six. Housewife. Rural residence. Interview conducted in July 2019 in the presence of her oldest daughter.

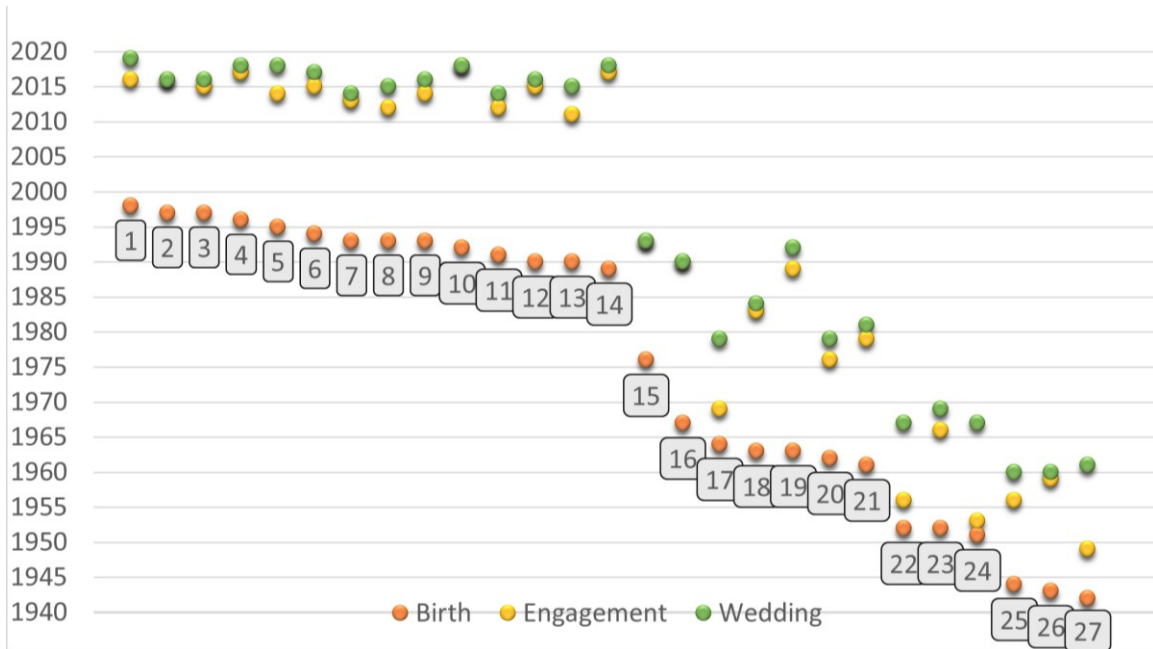
Xhemile (b. 1951). Married. Mother of eight. Housewife. Rural residence. Interview conducted in July 2019, for the most part one-on-one.

Zymrije (b. 1961). Married. Mother of four. Housewife. Rural residence. Interview conducted in July 2019 in the presence of her daughter-in-law and my mother-in-law.

## Appendix B.

### Interviewees: years of birth, engagement, and marriage

This chart graphically represents the years of birth, engagement, and marriage of my interviewees. Early arranged marriages were prevalent among the middle-aged and elderly women.



The following table gives the years of birth, engagement, and marriage of my interviewees. Some of my older interviewees were not too sure about their years of marriage and especially of engagement. They would say something along the lines “I must have been 13 or 14”.

<b>N</b>	<b>name</b>	<b>Born</b>	<b>engaged</b>	<b>age when engaged</b>	<b>married</b>	<b>age when married</b>
1	Kadire	1998	2016	(18)	2019	(21)
2	Hana	1997	2016	(19)	2016	(19)
3	Donjeta	1997	2015	(18)	2016	(19)
4	Linda	1996	2017	(21)	2018	(22)
5	Erza	1995	2014	(19)	2018	(23)
6	Erblina	1994	2015	(21)	2017	(23)
7	Nazmije	1993	2013	(20)	2014	(21)
8	Ardita	1993	2012	(19)	2015	(22)
9	Erina	1993	2014	(21)	2016	(23)
10	Rinesa	1992	2018	(26)	2018	(26)
11	Melodi	1991	2012	(21)	2014	(23)
12	Liria	1990	2015	(25)	2016	(26)
13	Fjolla	1990	2011	(21)	2015	(25)
14	Erdeta	1989	2017	(28)	2018	(29)
15	Shaha	1976	1993	(17)	1993	(17)



<b>N</b>	<b>name</b>	<b>Born</b>	<b>engaged</b>	<b>age when engaged</b>	<b>married</b>	<b>age when married</b>
<b>16</b>	Feride	1967	1990	(23)	1990	(23)
<b>17</b>	Remzije	1964	1969	(5)	1979	(15)
<b>18</b>	Hamide	1963	1983	(20)	1984	(21)
<b>19</b>	Lila	1963	1989	(26)	1992	(29)
<b>20</b>	Fatime	1962	1976	(14)	1979	(17)
<b>21</b>	Zymrije	1961	1979	(18)	1981	(20)
<b>22</b>	Ganimete	1952	1956	(4)	1967	(15)
<b>23</b>	Rahime	1952	1966	(14)	1969	(17)
<b>24</b>	Xhemile	1951	1953	(2)	1967	(16)
<b>25</b>	Hanife	1944	1956	(12)	1960	(16)
<b>26</b>	Hatixhe	1943	1959	(16)	1960	(17)
<b>27</b>	Rifadije	1942	1949	(7)	1961	(19)

## Appendix C.

### Bridal outfits and jewelry of two of my interviewees from the younger cohort

#### Melodi's outfits (10,000-euro wedding)

When Melodi (b. 1991) got married in 2014 to her long-time boyfriend, her in-laws equipped her with a wardrobe of bridal outfits: one elaborate dress (200 euros), two simpler dresses (180 euros and 150 euros), a traditional outfit consisting of white *dimi*, a silver-embroidered *jelek* with a matching belt, and a white shirt decorated with stiff lace (800 euros). She also paraded a puffy white gown (350 euros). Of course, she could not do without matching high-heeled shoes, so they bought her two pairs. Melodi also got a gold set, and additionally two rings, a necklace, a bracelet, and another pair of earrings, all made of gold (totaling 2,500 euros). As customary, the bride also received new everyday clothes and shoes. The entire wedding cost 10,000 euros, Melodi said, and a quick calculation shows that about half of the money was spent on clothing and gold jewelry for the bride.

#### Linda's outfits (20,000-euro wedding)

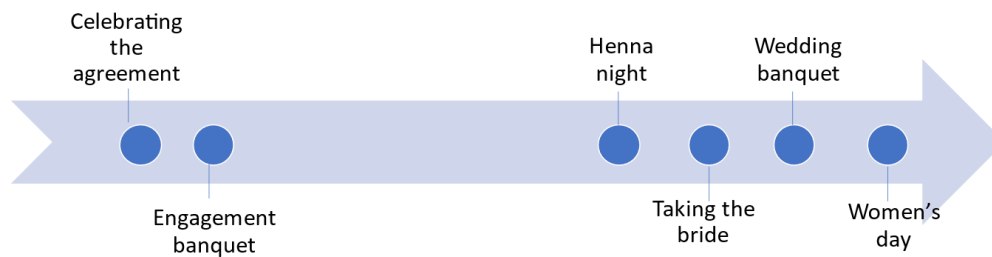
All the hairdressers and makeup artists in the small-town salon seemed to be up to date with the details of the 20,000-euro wedding of Linda (1996), a regular customer there. An unexpected power outage had silenced the usual roar of the hairdryers and, while waiting to have her hair done for her cousin's wedding, kindergarten teacher Linda told me how she had married the year before to a man whom she had met online. Her in-laws did not spare money for the bride of their only son. They bought her a 1,200-euro dress, and traditional outfits – a *dallam* matched with Turkish trousers and a shirt (1,000 euros), two more pairs of Turkish trousers and two *jeleks*. They also bought her a gold set for 1,500 euros and she got a *lira* from her mother. While Linda was not so thorough in listing the prices of the clothing and jewelry she received, according to my calculations, her in-laws must have spent no less than 5,000 euros on her outfits and gold.

For a list of the typical bridal gifts in the 1980s see Reineck 1991: 86.

## Appendix D.

### Timeline of the wedding festivities

The following timeline aims at clarifying for readers the sequence of the events through which a marrying couple can go in contemporary Kosovo.



A couple's engagement can be celebrated first in the midst of close family and then with a more sumptuous banquet. The wedding which can take place months or years after the engagement also consists of several events – a henna night somewhat resembling a bachelorette party, the culmination of taking and welcoming the bride, the banquet in a restaurant and the women-only after-party. Lulije's story aims to present all these festivities.

The timeline includes all possible feasts and some people do organize all of them. However, many couples, mostly for financial reasons, decide to have only some of them. Donjeta (b. 1997) and her husband, for example, had a big engagement feast and no wedding celebration. Some couples prefer going on a honeymoon instead of one of the feasts – Rinesa (b. 1992) said that going for a five-day vacation to the Albanian seacoast made more sense than organizing a henna night, but it is also possible that she did not feel entitled to a big celebration, because that was her second marriage. Erza and her husband A. also decided to forego the wedding feast. With A.'s savings from several years of work abroad, they built and furnished a house, bought a car and even had a little money left as a financial cushion.

## Appendix E.

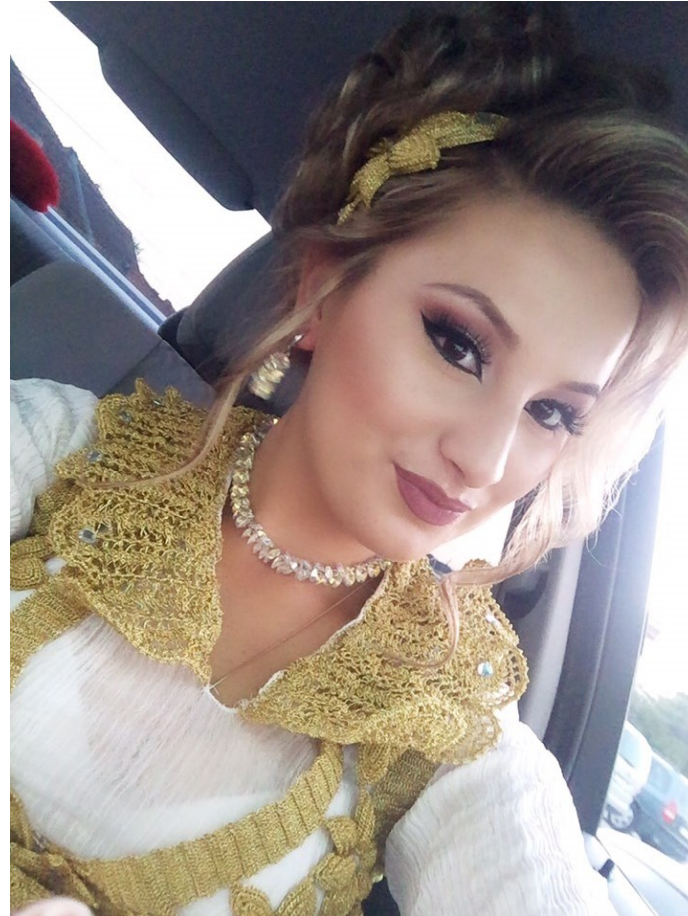
### Photos



*Image 2. The writing on the left calls for equality of men and women in institutions, in the workforce and in inheritance. The one on the right states: "Only 4% of women inherit property". Photo by the author.*



*Image 3. Waving the Albanian flag from a car which is part of the wedding procession. Photo by Rizah Kadriu.*



*Image 4. A nuse attending a feast several years after her marriage. In the left photo, she is dancing in dimi and a jelek. Photos provided by a research participant.*



*Image 5. At the second floor of a bridal shop. Photo by Rizah Kadriu.*



*Image 6. The makeup of a young married woman attending a feast. Photo provided by a research participant.*



*Image 7. Bridal makeup on the day of the wedding. Photo provided by a research participant*





*Image 8. A seamstress embroidering a dress. Photo by the author.*



*Image 9. A bride about to depart for her husband's home. Photo provided by a research participant.*



*Image 10. A dress appropriate for a lavish engagement feast. Photo by the author.*



*Image 11. Young nuse at a henna night. The first from left to right is wearing a dress and a hijab, the second also has a hijab and wears dimi and a mintan, the third is in dimi and a jelek and the last wears a dress with dallam. Neither of them is the bride-to-be. Photo by the author.*



*Image 12. Nuse wearing their gold at a henna night. The third from left to right is the bride-to-be. Photo by the author*



*Image 13. High-heeled shoes to wear with a dallam. Photo by the author.*



*Image 14. More high-heeled shoes. Photo by the author.*



*Image 15. Gold one-lira coin. Front and back. Photos by Rizah Kadriu.*



*Image 16. A bride's trousseau and the everyday and formal clothing the groom's family purchased for her, exhibited before the wedding at the bride's parental home. Photo provided by a research participant.*