

# *A Crisis of Identity: The Rise of Bride Kidnapping in Kyrgyzstan*

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## *Abstract*

The practice of bride kidnapping remains relatively popular in certain parts of the world, particularly in the rural Kyrgyzstan, where it is non-consensual at least half of the time. For Kyrgyzstan and its fellow post-Soviet republics, this issue clearly correlates to a sombre list of systematic gender issues, including domestic violence, sex crimes, and human trafficking, which have been on the rise since the nations' acquiring of their independence. This essay discusses the diverging attitudes towards this custom, such as many members of the older generation decidedly (albeit, at times, begrudgingly) defending it as a tradition, as well as the experience of the various actors involved, from the kidnapper groom-to-be to the bride's relatives. The aim is to demonstrate that the prevalence of this crime is intrinsically tied with Kyrgyzstan's troubled past, a socio-economic context of scarcity, and a misguided quest for an authentic identity – all within a system of inadequate government regulation.

## *Introduction*

Bride kidnapping is a surviving practice in several parts of the world, particularly in the post-Soviet Caucasus region and Central Asia, where it is part of the wider family of systematic gendered issues, such as domestic violence, sexual abuse, and sex trafficking. Despite being a human rights violation, bride kidnapping remains a divisive subject. Many locals consider it to be a 'necessary' tradition. Nevertheless, others (often families who have been affected), call for the custom to end, citing a host of associated problems, such as the victim suicide rate, and demanding stronger legal reinforcement of punishment, as well as public education regarding the matter. In this essay, I will address the causes for this phenomenon becoming commonplace, as well as illustrate that these are tied with the region's sense of revived ethnic identity, patriarchy, and fractured economy. In light of the available research data, this paper will

focus on bride kidnapping in Kyrgyzstan, with its high occurrence of *ala kachuu* infamous worldwide.

### Conceptualising the Process

The Kyrgyz term '(kyz) ala kachuu' translates to English as 'grab (the girl) and run'. It is typically performed by the prospective groom with the help from his group of friends. *Ala kachuu* involves planning, preparation, and working out the logistics of the best time and place for a successful capture. Cases have been known to take place both in broad daylight and at night, in the street or in the bride's home.

The details of these abductions vary considerably, as noted by Werner et al.: 'the prior relationship between the man and the woman, the motives for the kidnapping, the extent to which the woman agrees to the marriage before being kidnapped, the extent to which both families know about the plan to kidnap the bride, the existence of male and female co-conspirators, the use of deception and force in the act of kidnapping, the amount of resistance from the bride, and the ultimate outcome of the kidnapping act'.<sup>1</sup> With such variation, it is difficult to establish the exact proportion of forced marriages. For example, in such instances where the couple has had a prior relationship, the marriage itself may not have been against the woman's wishes, but the kidnapping may have been. With effort to control these variations, the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) reports around 12,000 brides kidnapped yearly in Kyrgyzstan,<sup>2</sup> while other sources estimate between 15% and 30% of marriages being a result of *ala kachuu*.<sup>3</sup>

After a young woman has been captured, she is brought to the family home of her kidnapper. She is taken to a special room, prepared in advance, where the groom's female relatives 'receive' the *kelin* (Kyrgyz for 'bride') with great warmth and hospitality (as well as physical force and intimidation in some cases) and attempt to convince her to stay. An integral part of the ritual is veiling the bride with a white scarf (*jooluk*) — a symbol familiar to Turkic and Westerners alike as a symbol of

purity and innocence, traits extremely highly regarded in this Islamic, homosocial setting. It is precisely these ideals that are used against the unwilling bride: the stigma attached to two people of the opposite sex spending any amount of time together, especially in a setting as intimate as the man's home is substantial. It is not uncommon for women to commit suicide in protest or, for those who do not go through with the wedding to be shunned and turn to prostitution.<sup>4</sup> One step over the threshold is all that is needed for a bride's virginity and honour to be shrouded in doubt, even rape is sometimes used to force the women to stay. In the eyes of the abducted woman's family, the best option often remains to go through with the wedding, for an (ostensibly) 'impure' girl's chances of subsequently finding a willing groom are slim. Even in the more consensual cases, Borbieva points out, women will 'act up' their upset and reluctance in order not to seem too eager and attest to their innocence.<sup>5</sup>

A party of older men from the groom's family then sets out to visit the woman's parents, bringing with them apologies and small gifts as they formally ask for the parents' blessing.<sup>6</sup> The woman's parents are then expected to make a decision, or at least advise their daughter. If the marriage goes ahead, all that is required to make it official is a Muslim ceremony known as *nikah*, officiated by an imam. Marriages that result from *ala kachuu* see greater levels of domestic violence, abandoned children, and divorce rates twice the average rate.<sup>7</sup> In the next section, I will address the historical processes that contributed to the popularisation of this practice.

### De-Sovietisation and a Search for National Identity

Soviet ideology undoubtedly had a massive transformative impact on nuptiality trends and customs in the republics of Central Asia. It affected gender relations by promoting equality and education for both sexes and granting women access to paid labour. Prior to the advent of the Soviet era, marriages were primarily arranged and agreed upon by the future couple's parents, in accordance with the *adat* — Kyrgyz traditional customary law. The Soviet state banned all early non-consensual

1 Cynthia Werner et al., "Bride kidnapping in post-Soviet Eurasia: a roundtable discussion." *Central Asian Survey* 37, no. 4 (2018): 582-3.

2 Comm. on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women, *Report of the Inquiry Concerning the Kyrgyz Republic Under Article 8 of the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women*, (2018).

3 Nedoluzhko, Lesia and Victor Agadjanian. "Between Tradition and Modernity: Marriage Dynamics in Kyrgyzstan." *Demography* 52 no. 3 (2015): 868.

4 *Bride Kidnapping in Kyrgyzstan*. Directed by VICE. 2011.

5 Borbieva, Noor O'Neill. "Kidnapping women: Discourses of emotion and social change in the Kyrgyz Republic." *Anthropological Quarterly* (2012): 146.

6 Kim, Elena and Frank G. Kariosis. "Bound to be grooms: the imbrication of economy, ecology, and bride kidnapping in Kyrgyzstan." *Gender, Place & Culture* (2020): 6.

7 Werner et al., "Bride kidnapping in post-Soviet Eurasia" *Central Asian Survey* 37, no. 4 (2018): 593.

marriage, outlawed the payment of dowry (*kalym*) for the bride (Gregory J. Massell 1974),<sup>8</sup> and placed greater emphasis on love-based marriages.

Kleinbach and Salimjanova observe a fascinating counterintuitive phenomenon resulting from these changes: a steady rise in bride kidnapping ever since the Soviet age. They relay that this originally took the form of consensual elopement, preconceived by the respective bride and groom as a way around their parents' arrangements.<sup>9</sup> The abduction of their daughter would leave the parents little choice but to bless the marriage even if they originally had plans for a different groom. Unfortunately, this gradually became less and less of an elopement and turned into non-consensual kidnappings which *appeared* like an ancient Kyrgyz tradition.

With the fall of the USSR, the now-independent state governments set out on a complex project to consolidate national identity across Caucasian and Central Asian republics. This 'de-Sovietisation' involved many processes and narratives within institutional, political and sociocultural structures.<sup>10</sup> Key to nationalisation was reviving the dominant ethnic group's supposed cultural heritage through new and old symbols and the idea of ethnic authenticity. Geukjian describes this process as the States construction of 'glorious historical myths', which are 'often used to mobilize the members of a nation around a common culture and increase their awareness of a shared national identity' and a common ethnic past.<sup>11</sup>

For Kyrgyzstan, this entailed converting the mythical figure of Manas from an eponymous epic 'into a historical superhero who fought evil' (the Mongolic peoples of Oirats) 'and struggled to unite the Kyrgyz tribes'.<sup>12</sup> The very ethnonym of *Kyrgyz* translates as 'forty tribes' and is a reference to this lore. President of fifteen years Askar Akayev, who assumed office a year before Kyrgyz independence and held it until his overthrow in the Tulip revolution of 2005, has described the Manus Epic as 'our historical chronicle, spiritual foundation, and cultural reality'.<sup>13</sup>

8 Massell, Gregory J. *The Surrogate Proletariat: Moslem Women and Revolutionary Strategies in Central Asia, 1919–1929*. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1974), 7.

9 Kleinbach, Russell and Lilly Salimjanova. "Kyz ala kachuu and adat: non-consensual bride kidnapping and tradition in Kyrgyzstan." *Central Asian Survey* 26 no. 2 (2007): 220.

10 Kamrava, Mehran. "Nation-Building in Central Asia: Institutions, Politics, and Culture." *The Muslim World* 110, no. 1 (2020): 6.

11 Geukjian, Ohannses. *Ethnicity, nationalism and conflict in the South Caucasus: Nagorno-Karabakh and the legacy of Soviet nationalities policy*. (Routledge, 2016), 18.

12 Kamrava, Mehran. "Nation-Building in Central Asia: Institutions, Politics, and Culture" *The Muslim World* 110, no. 1 (2020): 22.

13 Ibid

The idea of the *Manas* epic featuring any reference to any form of non-consensual *ala kachuu* is, however, a widely held misconception. As Kleinbach and Salimjanova write,

The fact that non-consensual bride kidnapping is not approved of in the *Manas* Epic does not mean that it did not happen. However as oral tradition is one source of knowledge about ethnographic practice, and given that the *Manas* Epic is oral tradition with the status of scripture in Kyrgyzstan, it is evidence that it was not considered a traditionally approved practice in pre-Soviet times, as it is not among the many traditional practices recounted in this very extensive epic.<sup>14</sup>

This is noteworthy as the marriage of Manas (the hero) is a significant theme in the epic, which does include depictions of other related practices, such as parental match-making and *kalym* negotiations. Ethnographic research shows that abductions of women used to be a rare occurrence, with their aggressive and non-consensual nature considered a grave insult to her family and would cause conflict between tribes, with violent retaliation in the form of raids and the objective of salvaging the young woman.<sup>15</sup>

*Ala kachuu* is, verifiably, *not* an ancient custom — yet its myth tends to get distorted, which falls nothing short of manipulating historical heritage for political interests. This is extremely in line with Edensor's notion of the 'nostalgic celebration of folk cultures' as 'a more valorised, seemingly "authentic" collection of cultural forms and practices which are being erased by modern mass culture'.<sup>16</sup> The 'modern' mentality which seeks to re-examine traditional values clashes with the patriotic identity organised by the young (in terms of independence) state as a tool of consolidating authoritarianism.

#### *The End of Transhumance*

Despite the glorification of the nomadic past, the onset of modernity was impossible to reverse. The context of this transition is essential for understanding the rise of bride

14 Kleinbach, Russell and Lilly Salimjanova. "Kyz ala kachuu and adat" *Central Asian Survey* 26 no. 2 (2007): 225.

15 Tatybekova, Zhanneta Saïma-saevna. *Raskreposchenie jenschiny kirgizki Velikoy oktiabrskoy revolutsiey*. (Frunze: Izdatelstvo Akademii Nauk Kirgizskoy SSR, 1963)

16 Edensor, Tim. *National identity, popular culture and everyday life*. (Routledge, 2020), 14.

kidnapping. Kyrgyzstan's socio-economic problems are largely a result of forced sedentarisation, started in the nineteenth century by the Russian Empire; followed by forced collectivisation under communism; and state retrenchment in today's neo-liberal climate of informal politics and clientelism. The land of modern-day Kyrgyzstan was once entirely agropastoral, inhabited by nomadic tribes and clans. These people existed in balance with nature, with migration patterns according to the seasons. They would relocate to highlands and lowlands during summer and winter respectively. As is common for the colonising power, they saw nomadism as primitive.

Communist reorganization introduced territorial units, property rights to land and its more intensive use, forcing many people to migrate to urban settlements, leaving nomadic clan lifestyle behind.<sup>17</sup> Today, inadequate support and reforms have devastating effects: 'cattle and sheep became heavily concentrated in low and medium altitudes causing overgrazing, pasture degradation, erosion of soil and result in loss of vegetation, soil compaction and erosion'<sup>18</sup> and the region — even more so in the rural areas — has long been plagued with poverty and unemployment. It is these crises that 'engendered a sense of lawlessness and frustration among young men',<sup>19</sup> and laid the path for *ala kachuu* being as widespread as it is.

Such socioeconomic setting bears repercussions on young people's ability to meet and socialise, whether as friends or as potential partners. Thus, there is a complete lack of rural recreational infrastructure such as parks, clubs, and cinemas.<sup>20</sup> Even though Kyrgyzstan is economically challenged, it must be noted that this is only one facet of the explanation for bride kidnapping — Uzbeks and Tajiks face similar living conditions yet do not engage in acts of bride kidnapping.<sup>21</sup> Therefore, it is the combination of the valorisation of nomadic past, economic difficulties, and social perception that have led to the child kidnapping culture which persists in Kyrgyzstan.

17 Kim and Kariosis. "Bound to be grooms" *Gender, Place & Culture* (2020): 3-4.

18 Ministry of Agriculture, Water Resources and Processing Industry. *Agricultural Investments and Services Project. Environmental Assessment and Management Plan*. (Bishkek: 2008).

19 Hughes, Ailey. "Bride Kidnapping and Land rights in rural Kyrgyzstan," *Girls not Brides*, March 26, 2013.

20 Werner et al., "Bride kidnapping in post-Soviet Eurasia" *Central Asian Survey* 37, no. 4 (2018): 592.

21 Ibid, 594.

### *Family Dynamics and Social Perception*

The return to traditionalism, of course, entailed a strongly patriarchal society, to which bride kidnapping testifies in blatantly equating woman with property. Many young women have plans of leaving the village, obtaining education and building a career — convincing them to forgo these aspirations can prove to be an impossible task, which kidnapping solves.<sup>22</sup> Paired with the economic problems, this practice serves not only a cultural, but also a utilitarian function. The *kelin* provides important domestic labour, as well as additional help with livestock during the intense summer period of *dzhailoo*, where women accompany their husbands and are responsible for dairy production.<sup>23</sup>

As the parents age, they increasingly put pressure on their sons to bring home a *kelin* as soon as possible. The matter is more urgent for many families in which the sons migrate abroad for work and are therefore absent for most of the year, making the wife's servitude towards her in-laws more valuable. The son's marriage is particularly important for mothers since, as Ismailbekova observes: '[f]emale authority is gained with age and is attested by the birth of a son whose marriage helps women achieve control and power.'<sup>24</sup> The bringing home of a girl, *kыз aldyk*, is understood by the matriarch as an opportunity to step back and lead a more relaxed lifestyle.

Young men who succumb to this pressure do so in hopes of meeting a certain cultural standard and bringing honour to their families. Marriage is essentially a rite of passage which makes them 'real Kyrgyz men' — a sentiment that ties in with the paramount issue at hand: a crisis of identity. At the same time, men are generally expected to possess a number of resources and a certain status — money, livestock, etc. — as a prerequisite to finding a wife. When they struggle to achieve these things, securing a marriage without kidnapping may seem impossible. Another obvious incentive for the groom is *ala kachuu* as a way to avoid dowry payment and/or the expensive cost of a wedding. In terms of law and legality, bride kidnapping is punishable by up to ten years in prison but, notoriously, 'the

22 Ibid, 593.

23 Kim and Kariosis. "Bound to be grooms" *Gender, Place & Culture* (2020): 12.

24 Ismailbekova, Aksana. "Constructing the Authority of Women through Custom: Bulak Village." *Nationalities Papers* 44 no. 2 (2016): 266-298 In Kim, Elena and Frank G. Kariosis. "Bound to be grooms: the imbrication of economy, ecology, and bride kidnapping in Kyrgyzstan." *Gender, Place & Culture* (2020): 16.

police and judicial system is corrupted by familial influence and bribery'.<sup>25</sup> Whether it's abduction or other gender-based violence, issues in this vein are generally regarded as a private matter, to be dealt with internally, if at all — guilt tends to be attached to the victim rather than the perpetrator. Marriage without both parties' consent is also prohibited by Sharia law. Tradition clearly supersedes both law and religion.

Each village has its own council of elders known as *aksaqal* — translated literally as white beards — who have unofficial yet considerable regulatory power and never fail to endorse marriages through the kidnapping custom. The revival and empowerment of *aksakal* courts was part of the state's efforts towards traditionalism and tribalism, supported by president Akayev. It must be noted that *aksakal* courts have been known to sentence their villagers, including girls who have escaped from an unwanted union, to corporal and capital punishment, e.g. through public stoning.<sup>26</sup> The moral authority lies precisely with these groups of the oldest men in the village, which contributes to the environment of hegemonic masculinity where women find it extremely difficult to challenge this order and their subordination.

#### *Conclusion and a Note on Reducing Bride Kidnapping*

There exists evidence which suggests that the attitudes towards bride kidnapping are slowly beginning to change, and the efforts of activists and of journalists have contributed to this. Joanna Hoare, who analysed the development of gender equality and development intervention in Kyrgyzstan points out that groups advocating for women's rights fight towards 'keeping gender issues on the national policy agenda' and have been successful in their resistance of legislation such as legalising polygamy, yet they 'remain dependent on the support of donors, international organisations, and transnational feminist networks ... both in terms of material and technical resources, but also what could be classed as 'moral support' in an environment that sees them and the issues they work on marginalised both by the state and within wider civil society'.<sup>27</sup>

<sup>25</sup> Werner et al., "Bride kidnapping in post-Soviet Eurasia" *Central Asian Survey* 37, no. 4 (2018): 592.

<sup>26</sup> Handrahan, Lori M. "Hunting for women: bride-kidnapping in Kyrgyzstan." *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 6, no. 2 (2004): 207-233.

<sup>27</sup> Hoare, Joanna. "Development and gender in Kyrgyzstan." *Social Research Centre Research Report*. (2009), 10.

Women's grassroots movements of Kyrgyzstan are challenged under pretenses of traditional Islamic values and sensibility, and have been subject to intimidation tactics. International Women's Day of 2020 saw over 70 mostly female activists gather in the streets of Bishkek demanding better rights, only to be attacked by a mob of self-proclaimed patriots. Men in masks, armed with sticks, 'charged the marchers, hitting them with sticks and trampling banners dedicated to equality'.<sup>28</sup> The perpetrators fled unpunished, and when the police arrived at the scene, the women were detained for hours.

The citizens of Kyrgyzstan and its neighbouring countries are in urgent need of better support systems for those who fall victim to this custom, as well as encouragement and resources to delay marriage and childbirth — since 'delayed childbirth typically correlates with increased educational attainment, and higher income for women, and decreased domestic violence'.<sup>29</sup> Campaigns for public education are a very effective method in this battle. Kleinbach and Sulimjanova's experience shows that simply establishing the Manas Epic to contain no scenes of bride kidnapping proves to be a strong argument in conversations with the public.<sup>30</sup> There needs to be reassurance that young people are *not* going against their national identity by opposing this practice, and an understanding that women's disempowerment affects the entire population negatively by producing a less productive workforce and aggravating the economic stagnation.

Scholarly research on this topic shows that, when faced with *ala kachuu*, both men and women seek to consolidate their honour and identity, and face serious pressures from their families, all in a setting full of contradictory governmental urges which promote both modernity and traditionalism. Economic development; continuing to spread awareness and advocating for women's rights; untangling the false narratives perpetrated for so long; and being vigilant about distinguishing between the occasional consensual elopement and the recurrent non-consensual kidnapping are all avenues that require work if there is hope of leaving this practice and its myriad of structural predicaments behind once and for all.

<sup>28</sup> Tolkun Namatbayeva, "Kyrgyz Activists Face Women's Day Violence From 'Patriots'." *The Moscow Times*, March 5, 2021.

<sup>29</sup> Werner et al., "Bride kidnapping in post-Soviet Eurasia" *Central Asian Survey* 37, no. 4 (2018): 594.

<sup>30</sup> Kleinbach, Russell and Lilly Salimjanova. "Kyz ala kachuu and adat: non-consensual bride kidnapping and tradition in Kyrgyzstan." *Central Asian Survey* 26 no. 2 (2007): 225.