

'Ala Kachuu', Bride Kidnapping in Kyrgyzstan

by Jackie Dewe Mathews

A third of all marriages in modern Kyrgyzstan are non consensual kidnaps. The Kyrgyz words 'ala kachuu' mean to grab and run. Typically a man abducts his bride by force or deception, enlisting his family to break her resistance, through hours of persuasion. If successful, the following morning the bride will be sitting quietly in a curtained off area wearing the traditional white wedding headscarf and an imam will be called in to marry them.

Some brides are kidnapped by total strangers while others by men they know. Some escape after violent ordeals, but most are persuaded to stay by tradition and lore and with their virginity and purity in question after a night at a man's house, they accept what they believe is their fate.

Ala kachuu was outlawed during the Soviet era and remains illegal under the Kyrgyz criminal code although kidnappers are rarely prosecuted. Since the Kyrgyz declaration of independence in 1991 incidents of ala kachuu have surged for a number of reasons: it is seen as part of a national identity that was denied by Soviet rule, little social structure for sexes to mix exists but parental pressure on a man to take a wife at a certain age remains strong and compared to the expense of ritualistic weddings and the custom of gift exchanges between the families it is considered a cheaper alternative.

Although the practice is said to have its roots in nomadic customs, the tradition has been corrupted and remains at odds with modern day Kyrgyzstan.



Kyrgyzstan, Issyk-Kul Oblast. A group of young boys on their way to the double wedding of two girls kidnapped by two brothers. A car is almost always used by the kidnapers who are always accompanied by a group of boys.



Kyrgyzstan, Issyk-Kul Oblast. A gift of a sheep which form part of bride price, 'kalym'. Sheep, cattle or a horse, along with money, clothes, vodka and sweets are given to a bride's family by the family of the groom in thanks for raising and educating her. After marriage a bride is considered to belong to her husband's family. Similar gifts are given in cases of 'ala kachuu' bride kidnapping, when the groom's family visit the bride's to ask forgiveness for their son's act, a ceremony known as 'achu-basar'.



“We were not dating, he was just a boy who used to hang around me. I did not feel anything towards him. His aunt knew my family so the two families decided I should stay.”

Kyrgyzstan, Issk-Kul Oblast: A portrait of Ainura wearing a marriage scarf behind the curtain, where she was held during her kidnap and is expected to stay for the first few weeks of marriage. Ainura was kidnapped and married three days previously to a man she barely knew. Azat, her husband was with his brother who also kidnapped a girl the same night although he claims to have been dating her. The boys had come under pressure from their father to find wives. Many women are kidnapped by men who may have seen them but have never spoken to them as modern day Kyrgyzstan lacks the infrastructure to encourage social interaction between the sexes. To avoid the scandal of rejection for the brothers or the questioned purity of the girls, the families decided it was best for Ainura and Aigul to accept the proposals, negotiating a ‘kalym’, bride price to pacify the girl’s parents.



“My father had just finished building a new house and said it was time for me to find a bride so I drove to Bishkek with a group of friends to the university dormitory where Aigul was living and we stole her from her room at night with no shoes and only dressed in her pyjamas.”

Kyrgyzstan, Issk-Kul Oblast: A portrait of Aigul and Bekzat three days after her kidnap. Although they had been dating, Aigul was kidnapped by Bekzat and his brother when their father suggested it was time for them to marry. Beksat's brother Azat also kidnapped a girl that night however they were not seeing each other. Parental pressure plays a large part in the kidnapping process either through honouring the family tradition or through desire for a daughter in law.



Kyrgyzstan, Issyk-Kul Oblast. A visitor gives a headscarf to Aizat, a newly kidnapped bride. Abducted just three days ago by a stranger, she must sit behind a curtain while guests travel to see her and celebrate with the groom's family who will have slaughtered an animal for a feast which can last up to a month. As a daughter-in-law she will be expected to wear a headscarf in the company of her new family.



Kyrgyzstan, Issyk-Kul Oblast. Guests give thanks for a wedding feast at a house where a girl was kidnapped three days previously. After a wedding the family of the groom open their doors to friends and neighbours to visit and see the new daughter-in-law. An animal is slaughtered and celebrating can last up to a month.



Kyrgyzstan, Issyk-Kul Oblast. Bekzat and Azat, two brothers marrying their kidnapped brides (Ainura and Aigul). Although Aigul had been dating Bekzat, Ainura barely knew Azat. Usually a kidnap is marked only by a Muslim ceremony in the home, however this family are also having a wedding party at a local restaurant where they have invited an official to register the marriage. Kidnapped marriages are rarely officially registered which leaves the bride without rights to property or children.



“I told my parents we had been dating and since it’s customary for Kyrgyz girls to cry when they are kidnapped, they believed me.”

Kyrgyzstan, Issk-Kul Oblast: Aizat and Murat three days after the kidnap and forced betrothal of Aizat. She resisted marriage to Murat, a stranger, for as long as possible but was persuaded to go through with it by Murat’s grandmother who, at 82, commands much respect according to Kyrgyz lore. During a kidnap, elders are often summoned in order to influence the bride to stay.



“I never would have stayed if I had had a choice.”

Kyrgyzstan, Issyk-Kul Oblast: Sophia and Artyak who were married after he kidnapped her. She had already evaded kidnap a year ago and was engaged to be married to someone else when Artyk took her to be his wife. They were friends and he knew she was engaged but he decided to kidnap her anyway, knowing that once he had taken her home to his elderly grandmother, who according to Kyrgyz lore commands great respect, there would be little she could do. During a kidnap, elders are often summoned in order to influence the bride to stay.



“If my brothers ever kidnapped a girl I would take her back to her home myself.”

Kyrgyzstan, Issk-Kul Oblast: Aizada was kidnapped at 17 by a stranger. Although she now has two children, Doolotbai and Bermet with him his family want him to replace her with a new wife due to her heart condition. They no longer live together and he threatens her with violence almost daily. However, as kidnapped marriages are rarely registered, the bride has almost no rights to property or children.



“I found out that it was my teacher who suggested me as a bride for the son of the family who kidnapped me because I was from a poor family who were unlikely to be able to come to my rescue.”

Kyrgyzstan, Issyk-Kul Oblast: A portrait of a young woman from a relatively impoverished family who escaped kidnap and enforced marriage when her aunt rescued her. She refused to testify against her kidnapper because of the potential scandal it would create; having spent the night in a kidnapper's house, her virginity would be questioned and her family's reputation left in ruins. Kidnapped brides and their families rarely prosecute because corruption is rife in the justice system and the police are commonly paid off by the kidnapper and his family.



“I don’t hold much hope in the police, even if someone is murdered they turn a blind eye.”

Kyrgyzstan, Issyk-Kul Oblast: Zoya, whose daughter Ainura was kidnapped the previous night from this room by four men. Although devastated at the loss of her daughter, Zoya, a widower, subsequently gave in to pressure from neighbours and relatives to accept the kidnap as a Kyrgyz tradition. Often the decision to leave a daughter with her kidnapper will be an economic one. After marriage a bride is considered to belong to her husband’s family, they will pay for her education and look after all her needs. According to tradition, Zoya would also receive gifts of money and livestock from her future son in law’s family as a way of making peace.



“When I was kidnapped my life ended. I have been in a state of shock ever since. I cannot forgive him for what he did to me. He killed my world.”

Kyrgyzstan, Bishkek: A portrait of a woman kidnapped 13 years ago. She was kidnapped by a stranger at 18 and was forced to marry him. The kidnap deeply affected her; she was not psychologically or physically prepared for marriage and she has been in a state of shock ever since. Despite having two children by him she feels no love for her husband. She has considered leaving countless times but being a conservative Kyrgyz woman she fears judgement by those around her.



“Even after the marriage ceremony I was still waiting and hoping for my family to come and get me.”

Kyrgyzstan, Issyk-Kul Oblast: Merim and her son Emir. Merim was kidnapped by a man from a neighbouring village and forced into marriage. Although her mother was against the forced union, her father, on the advice of his own mother, allowed it to take place. According to Kyrgyz custom, elders and their wishes command much respect.



Kyrgyzstan, Issyk-Kul Oblast. Omurbai and Meerkan on the third day of hosting over 160 guests in their house to see their new daughter-in-law who was recently kidnapped by their son. Omurbai has just returned from visiting the girl's family to beg forgiveness for the kidnap and to offer gifts as way of compensation. He was welcomed in and the two families celebrated. As a young man Omurbai also kidnapped Meerkan who was from his village.



Kyrgyzstan, Issk-Kul Oblast. Sophia in a kitchen with her new mother-in-law. Sophia was kidnapped once before and escaped but was forced to stay after the second attempt. As the newest daughter-in-law she takes on the lowest position in the family and must do all the domestic chores.



“They forced me into their car like a sheep and drove me to his village with loud music playing to drown out my screams.”

Kyrgyzstan, Issyk-Kul Oblast: Bermet who was kidnapped by a boy whose advances she had rejected. Although she attempted escape more than once, the women in her husband’s family broke her resolve and she was forced to marry Ermet. He quickly became violent and after two months she escaped. Her chances of remarrying are strong as she was never pregnant by Ermet.



“Even though we are married we have not told some members of his family about my past. It would be too shocking for them.”

Kyrgyzstan, Bishkek: A married couple walk in a park in Bishkek. Whilst both living and working in neighbouring Kazakhstan she had been kidnapped for marriage by a Kazakh friend. Although she eventually escaped back to Kyrgyzstan with her Kyrgyz friend (with whom she had fallen in love), and was later formally married to him, the couple maintain their anonymity to protect his family. In Muslim Kyrgyzstan, where virginity is revered, a girl who has been kidnapped and then leaves is considered to be tainted.



Kyrgyzstan, Issyk-Kul Oblast. Bekbosun and Bubakan on their 60th wedding anniversary surrounded by their family. Bubakan was kidnapped by Bekbosun on horseback on his 20th birthday as part of the Kyrgyz tradition of bride stealing.



“I did not feel tricked, instead it was more like a surprise, but of course every girl dreams about a big wedding. This is just the way it happened for me.”

Kyrgyzstan, Issy-Kul Oblast: Erlan and Zela who were married after he kidnapped her. They had been dating for a year previous to the kidnap and are now happily married. With the price of weddings remaining expensive, a kidnapped wedding is sometimes considered to be a cheaper option for the boy's family - who traditionally pay for the wedding.



Kyrgyzstan, Issk-Kul Oblast: A young girl in the village of Tiup. Girls in rural areas are particularly vulnerable to kidnap. For their protection parents often choose to send them to study in the capital Bishkek during their college and university years.

All photographs taken by Jackie Dewe Mathews in Kyrgyzstan October and November 2009.
www.jackiedewemathews.com
07813312916