

Bride Kidnapping in Kyrgyzstan

Director Petr Lom

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Ala Kachuu, meaning 'to take and run away' in Kyrgyz, is the act of abducting a woman to marry her. Ala Kachuu in Kyrgyzstan takes a variety of forms ranging from consensual, staged abduction, to violent non-consensual kidnapping. Although bride kidnapping is illegal in Kyrgyzstan an estimated 50% of marriages in some areas of the country are the result of kidnapping and around two-thirds of these are non-consensual kidnappings (Kleinbach, Ablezov, and Aitieva 2005). Filmed in the southern region of the Central Asian republic of Kyrgyzstan, anthropologist Petr Lom's film documents the experiences of five young women kidnapped for marriage. None of the kidnappings in Lom's film are consensual, although in at least one case it seems that members of the woman's family are aware of the kidnap plans.

The groom's family typically plans kidnappings and the male friends of the groom carry out abductions. Their primary task is to bring the woman to the groom's family home where she is held until the groom's female relatives can convince her to agree to the wedding, symbolized through wearing a marriage scarf. She may be kept by the women overnight, and as a consequence, is shamed with no longer being a pure woman. The incidence of bride kidnapping in Kyrgyzstan increased after independence in 1991 and has been illegal since 1994 (Kleinbach, Ablezov, and Aitieva 2005). Some cases of bride kidnapping are recorded in the pre-Soviet period but there is little evidence to support the view that it is a traditional Kyrgyz practice, since the number of cases has risen steadily in the last fifty years and especially after the post-independence economic collapse. Bride kidnapping also takes place in Turkmenistan, in Kazakhstan and in parts of the Caucasus, with an estimated 80% of marriages in southern Kazakhstan in the late 1990s arising from kidnapping (Abdulaeva, Arjomand, and Nariman 2004). Lom's anthropological experience is evident in his desire to let the participants speak for themselves and he



avoids the temptation to explicitly direct the audience's interpretation of events by omitting a narrative voice over. Instead, he relies on subtitle translations of interviews and film of the families as they plan and carry out the kidnappings. Viewers are likely to be struck by the contrast between the uncompromising physical reality of abduction and the obvious gentleness of many of the participants.

Women play an important role in the kidnapping, and once the victim has been handed over to them life in the house takes on the feel of a tentative prenuptial celebration. Party music plays loudly on a stereo system and the men go outside to await the outcome of the women's intervention. It is an odd juxtaposition of tension, distress and celebration similar to fictional scenes of childbirth in period dramas. What comes across in this film is the quiet acceptance of bride kidnapping as an everyday reality in Kyrgyz women's lives. Most of the women in the film have their own kidnap stories to tell and use these to legitimize their actions as kidnappers. One of the victims, apparently happily married after her kidnapping, recounts the advice she was given by women in her family who, once



she had agreed to the marriage, advised her to not to resist the sexual advances of her new husband as she was 'not so young' and might never lose her virginity. The cultural expectation of submissiveness is summed up when a bride tells the interviewer that 'when a woman loves, she yields. When a man loves he takes.... Our life is about kidnapping, accepting and living on'. The film provides viewers with an insight into the complex social and cultural context of bride kidnapping in Kyrgyzstan and raises obvious questions about the civil rights of Kyrgyz women and the Kyrgyz authorities' failure to protect them. At the same time it leaves the viewer with a sense of unease about our preconceptions about the primacy and nature of love in sexual relationships. I watched the film a number of times and at each viewing found more to engage me. I began to wonder how common bride kidnapping is in other parts of the world. Initially I looked for examples from Central Asia, but I also decided to check the statistics on forced marriage in the UK. The Forced Marriage Unit at the Foreign and Commonwealth Office deals with around 300 reported cases of forced marriage each year (Forced Marriage Unit 2006) and it is widely accepted that there are in excess of 1000 cases of forced marriage in the UK each year (Phillips and

Dustin 2004). I was also surprised to find that forced marriage is not illegal in the UK, although kidnapping, assault, threatening behaviour and many of the activities that are used to force marriages are outlawed. Lom's film may have focused on one small Central Asian country, but it is clear that the issues it raises are globally relevant.

In general, Lom's anthropological approach to documentary works well, allowing personal stories and meanings to emerge naturally throughout the film, but for western viewers there are times when a little additional explanation would have helped. In the film, kidnappers often claim that the girl's family know about and are in agreement with the abduction in order to convince the victim to submit. In one scene, a young woman is urged by one of the women not to resist because 'Your aunt wants to help', implying that her family are actively involved in the kidnap. The casual viewer is unlikely to be aware that in Kyrgyzstan 'aunt' and 'uncle' are general terms of respect applied to older women and men. In other scenes, there is disagreement within the groom's family about whether the kidnap should take place at all. Some clarification of roles and relationships would have

helped the audience to understand the social complexity and cultural context of these disagreements. These minor issues apart, I would strongly recommend this film as a reliable and culturally sensitive insight into a globally relevant issue. The film works well in its own right as a study of local phenomena but it also has great potential as a stimulus for classroom discussions about global gender roles, relationships, civil liberties and social ethics. It can also provide opportunities for discussion about the role of documentary filmmaking especially in the area of human rights, ethics and criminal activities.

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