

# NATIONALIST TENSIONS: TRADITION AND MODERNITY IN DISCUSSIONS OF KYRGYZ BRIDE-CAPTURE<sup>1</sup>

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Bride kidnapping, or *alakachuu*, is the single most common form of marriage practice in sections of rural Kyrgyzstan. A young woman, typically between the ages of 18 and 22, is tricked or convinced to get into a car with a group of men, who she may or may not know. She is taken to the family home of one of her kidnappers. There, his extended family will be gathered with a collection of gifts. The female and elderly family members attempt to convince the young woman to marry into the family. Barring the highly unlikely event of refusal, the bride is pronounced wife that night, as her new mother-in-law ties a ceremonial scarf (*jooluk*) over her hair. After the marriage is consecrated, the new couple sleeps together. In more conservative homes, the sheets are inspected in the morning to insure that the bride was, indeed, a virgin. If she was not, the bloodless sheets may be hung outside and great shame will fall upon the bride as well as her family.

*Alakachuu* stands as a focal point around which nationalist and modernist discourses are organized today. American and European human rights groups speak out against the practice and, indeed, many Kyrgyz are opposed to the notion of marriage without full bridal consent. In July of 2002, however, the chief of police in a major city of Kyrgyzstan contacted my host family, knowing that I was studying *alakachuu*. One of the policemen working under him was planning to steal a bride, and he called to inform me of the event. Although laws forbid the practice, they are rarely if ever upheld.

The nationalist discourse is echoed time and time again across the Kyrgyz countryside. Men say they steal their women because it is traditional. In Bishkek, nostalgia for country life was evident when a young military student told me that he would consider stealing a wife, because it is Kyrgyz tradition. In the course of my research, I found that Kyrgyz men take pride

in planning, carrying out, and talking about the practice. I asked a 35 year-old radio technician named Orozbek what happens after a wedding if the woman does not want to be married to the man. Orozbek said that different mentalities exist in America and Kyrgyzstan, and that the husband wouldn't be concerned about this, because eventually his wife would be happy and love him. It would become his job in life to make his wife happy, and he would not feel real joy until his whole household felt such joy.

On the other side of the coin are the modernists, who would like to see *alakachuu* go the way of gulag labor and forced collectivization. Although there is no question that the tradition of bride-capture predates Lenin's revolution, Arzykan Momuntaeva, of the Coalition for Democracy and Civil Society, says emphatically that the democratization project must include a cessation of *alakachuu*. She states firmly that none of her sons will participate in bride-stealing. In her opinion, the change must come from parents rather than government.

Members of the Kyrgyz intelligentsia are drawn between the two opposing camps. Supporters of President Askar Akaev who wish to represent Kyrgyzstan in a favorable, modern light speak critically of *alakachuu*, while rural people who seemingly do not have as much of an interest in painting a particular image of Kyrgyzstan do not. For example Mashakbay, a radio reporter in the small town of Talas spoke of *alakachuu* favorably at first. He said that *alakachuu* had been part of Kyrgyz culture, because Kyrgyz had been nomadic. I asked about *alakachuu* in the context of democracy, and whether the practice had changed since independence. Mashakbay's expressed opinions shifted. He replied that *alakachuu* is a problem, should be stopped, and is rare. He said that during Soviet times, Kyrgyz and Russian culture became mixed (*smeshalos*), so *alakachuu*

became less popular than it had been. He said that it only happens in villages. He seemed to be nervous or defensive at this point, and I felt as though I was talking to a press secretary in Akaev's government. With the advent of democracy, he was saying, *alakachuu* will cease.

In Mashakbay's speech, nationalist-traditionalism was evident. He alluded to pre-Soviet Kyrgyz nomadic life with nostalgia. On the other hand, Mashakbay reveals a quasi-democratic philosophy that is definitively modern, and pro-Akaev (and perhaps inspired by my status as an outsider). Notable was a presidential campaign calendar that hung in one corner of the office, projecting five years into the future. Askar Akaev spells democracy, and democracy equals American-style modernity where *alakachuu* will be a thing of the past.

But traditions die hard. A small-town public university rector defended a traditionalist argument for me that was similar to Mashakbay's opening statement. After telling a story reinforcing notions of Central Asian moral "wealth" over that found in Europe and America, Mr. Omurbekov said that as a "modern person" he was against *alakachuu*, but that he believed marriages formed by kidnap are likely to be more successful. His hypothesis for this is that when dating, couples only see each other's best sides. When they then get married and start a family, there is disappointment when the whole person is revealed. With *alakachuu*, there is no idealized view, and therefore no subsequent disappointment. Here, *alakachuu* is both defended for practical reasons, and rejected in terms of civility and modernity. If nationalism is associated with bride capture, to be nationalist is to be non-modern.

Yet, high value is nonetheless placed on the practice. One man said that *alakachuu* was a very good thing because it allowed decent men who were not attractive to be married. Also, it permitted men who couldn't afford expensive dowries to marry. *Alakachuu* is also often spoken of romantically, as more of an elopement than a kidnap. If an arranged marriage (*cirqohsalas*) is made by parents when children are very young, and either party doesn't wish to marry their assigned spouse, they may elope with someone else. Elopement often takes the form of *alakachuu*, in the sense that the young woman is taken from the family without her parent's permission.

Women have more agency in Kyrgyz marriage patterning than may at first appear. In theory, a potential bride always has the choice of whether to stay and marry her perspective husband or not. These weddings always happen at the groom's family's house, so any pressure exerted on the woman comes from males and females alike. In fact, women members of the groom's family are said to be the most convincing proponents of most unions. Elderly women, in particular, are strongly revered and their urgings are forceful. Many of the women I interviewed who had been kidnapped said that they would have left, had it not been for the old women. Some old women threaten to curse the young women if they leave. The power relation established during this first interaction between bride and mother-in-law is profound. In traditional religious homes, the bride must obey and defer to her in-laws at every moment. The mother-in-law may even select the bride, playing a powerfully agentive role in her son's marriage.

Many men stated that they only kidnap women who they already love, or know they will be able to love for life. Some women encourage their own kidnapping, by showing favor to particular men, or, in more overt cases, by advertising their availability for marriage. In a small town, for example, I visited the house of a young woman – Jazgul – with my friend, Hamzat. The two were both unmarried and friendly with each other, colleagues at a local university. Jazgul stood in an adjacent room and put on make-up, before a stand-up mirror, as Hamzat and I drank *komus*. While she beautified herself, she told us that she was going to be stolen on the 13th of August. She mentioned that the other woman that we had sat with at the concert two weeks before had recently been kidnapped, and that now it was her turn. Her friends had supposedly revealed a certain surprise plan to her. She went on to say that she didn't really care for the man too much, but was not conclusive one way or the other about whether or not she planned to stay and marry. Hamzat's sister, when I told her the story later, said that Jazgul was 'Like a fox', and 'Knows how to get what she wants'. She went on to say that she was certain that Jazgul was not going to be kidnapped, and that women routinely lie about such things to raise their prestige in the eyes of potential suitors. In her opinion, Jazgul was actually interested in baiting Hamzat.

The case of Jazgul and Hamzat demonstrates a situation where a woman positions herself in the hopes of procuring a particular husband. She calls for Hamzat often, but can't directly initiate marriage. Instead she demonstrates her availability for courtship or marriage. She strategizes. Although gender equality was a goal throughout the Soviet era in Kirghizia just as much as it was in Russia, women of marrying age do not have the agency of their young male counterparts. Nonetheless, as this study shows, they have begun to create a space to address their desires.

### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> This study reflects ethnographic research for my undergraduate thesis carried out during June-August of 2001 and 2002 (primarily the latter). During my first summer in Kyrgyzstan, I lived with a family in Bishkek for three weeks, and for four weeks in Tyup, near Lake Issyk-Kul in the eastern part of the country. It was in Tyup that two women in their early twenties described *alakachuu* to me, and although I began preliminary research that summer, my inquiry began in earnest the following summer. In June of 2002, I arrived in the town of Talas (pop. 30,000), where I lived with a family for seven weeks. The central generation (i.e. parents) were married by means of bride capture, which I describe in an undergraduate thesis written at Reed College (2003). Hamzat, who appears in this paper, is the couple's son. I received extensive help from Rusaldan and Kishimjan, who are the two elder daughters in the family. Kishimjan also served as a translator from Kyrgyz at times. In addition to my conversations and observations with the family, I interviewed students, professors, and administrators at the local university, as well as journalists and media employees, non-governmental organization (NGO) workers, policemen, and friends and relatives of my hosts. After my time in Talas, I stayed for three weeks with the family that had hosted me the previous summer in Bishkek, and also spoke with them extensively about my research. This research was funded with support from the Oregon Consortium for Asian Studies (OCAS).