

'Forty houses should forbid the girls...'



Non-consensual bride kidnapping is practiced in western Mongolia amongst the Kazakh diaspora. In neighbouring Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan the practice is thought to be increasing. In Mongolia there are no data indicating the prevalence of the practice, but according to local women it is a common occurrence. Although bride kidnapping is illegal, incidents are not generally reported to the police, and kidnappers are almost never charged. Anna Portisch considers one young woman's kidnapping, and reflects on social control mechanisms within the community and how they are negotiated.

— Anna Portisch —



ON A COLD WINTER MORNING IN 2005, Maira and I stood talking in the central square in the provincial centre of Bayan-Ölgii. She was a music teacher at the school in the village where I was conducting fieldwork, and had come to Ölgii on school business. As we exchanged news, I became aware of someone shouting behind her. I ignored the man's voice thinking it was a drunk returning home. The shouting continued and as we both turned to face the man Maira froze. I asked her a question but she stared past me at the square behind. Then I heard her name being shouted, 'Hey! Maira's come to town. Maira is here...' One of the drivers of Ölgii's dilapidated fleet of Lada-taxis was hanging out the car door in a heavy sheepskin coat shouting at us in a mocking voice. Maira asked me to walk with her to her aunt's house. Shaking and looking nervously over her shoulder, she explained that the man had been amongst those who had kidnapped her the previous year.

The previous winter, Maira had accompanied her music students to an annual school competition in the neighbouring town of Tsengel. Some of her students had won medals and it had been a busy time. On the last day, the students were sent home in vans and the teachers and jury were arranging lifts. Most cars were full, and when Maira found that an old school friend happened to be in town she happily accepted a lift from him to the village where her parents lived. A few friends of his were in the car, and although her companions were a little subdued Maira was in high spirits.

The road that connects Tsengel with other villages is a network of dirt tracks that criss-crosses the mountainous landscape. Between villages, isolated houses sit at the foot of sheltering hills in cover from the spring winds. Relatively few cars drive the distance, at busy times perhaps five cars per day. In winter, transportation is less frequent. The temperature regularly drops to minus 30-35 C and the hillsides can be treacherously icy. As darkness fell they came down the mountainside towards her parents' village where the faint lights from a few windows could be seen.

Her friend did not turn off when they reached the track which leads to the village. Maira joked with him, asking him if he

was tired; had he not recognised the turning? He and his companions kept silent. She realised she had been tricked and pleaded with the men to take her home. She cried and tried to force them to stop the car. She tried to open the door, but was restrained by the men who sat on either side of her.

Once the kidnapped bride arrives at her potential parents-in-law's house where the wedding is planned to take place, she must face the elders of this family, whom, ordinarily, she should treat with respect. The eldest woman will try to put a scarf over her head. If she succeeds, this indicates the captured bride's acceptance of the marriage. Her initial resistance is likely to be interpreted as the 'correct role play' of a modest and well-behaved girl. If she continues to resist the 'proposal', the elders of the household are likely to physically and psychologically coerce her to stay, the women pointing out that they too were kidnapped; assuring her of the groom's good character; or reminding her that if she leaves her chances of marrying a man of her choice will be slim (cf. HRW 2006; Kleinbach & Salimjanova 2007; Lom 2005; Werner 2004).

Young Kazakh women state that if their parents were to support the marriage, it would be extremely difficult for them to reject the 'proposal'. The kidnapped bride's parents may consider it a pragmatic and 'better' option for her to marry the kidnapper, even though he may not be the love of her life, since rejecting the 'proposal' will put her at fault in several ways. Having spent the night at the aspiring groom's home, she will no longer be perceived as a virgin. By leaving she will bring shame on her family, and occupy an unacceptable position as 'spoiled' yet not married. Potentially, she will face hostility from those connected to the aspiring groom, and the approaches of men in the community that will follow from her 'spoiled' status. Young eligible men (and their mothers) are likely to be put off by her ruined reputation and what it indicates: that she is unlikely to become a respectful and obedient daughter-in-law.

Maira spent the 'wedding night' sitting quietly and biding her time. In the morning the groom's parents called her parents, as is the custom, to formally apologise for having kidnapped her. When Maira's parents came to settle the matter, Maira



Bride kidnapping amongst the Kazakh of western Mongolia

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Fig. 1 (left)
Road north of
Tsengel, Bayan-Ölgii
province. Courtesy
of the author.

Fig. 2 (left inset)
Wedding
celebration, Ölgii
province centre,
summer 2005.
(This bride was
not kidnapped).
Courtesy of the
author.

Fig. 3 (above)
A bride leaves
her natal home
accompanied by
her husband,
summer 2008.
(This bride was
not kidnapped).
Courtesy of the
author.

protested so strongly that her parents had no choice but to take her home. On returning home, her mother was so angry she beat her with the poker from the stove, leaving permanent scars. Her mother blamed Maira for accepting the lift; she should not have been so friendly with the young man at school, leading him on so that he wanted to marry her. In addition, Maira had put her own personal happiness above her respect for her parents, and above the good relations between her own clan and that of the aspiring groom.

A marriage of strangers

While many people in Bayan-Ölgii marry for love, it is equally understood that it is normal for young people not to know one another well upon marrying and to 'grow to love one another', or simply establish a good working relationship. Women often (voluntarily) marry men they have recently met, sometimes only days before the wedding. In terms of how well acquainted a bride is with her groom, a woman who has been kidnapped, does not necessarily face such a different situation from a woman marrying someone she barely knows.

This situation is partly understandable in light of the difficulties of 'dating' in a social environment defined by co-habitation and co-dependence, and respect of elders. Akiner describes social hierarchy in Central Asia more generally as organised around 'patriarchal control allied to maternal authority' (1997: 286). In Bayan-Ölgii young people are aware of the attitudes of their elders, anticipate their reactions, and often family and community concerns take precedence over individual inclinations or desires. As Akiner further points out, '[t]he positive aspect of community life was that it provided a highly effective, informal and very sensitive social security network. The negative aspect was that it was very difficult to escape from its all-embracing control.' (Ibid.: 278). In Bayan-Ölgii, a proverb states that 'Forty houses should forbid the girls, thirty houses should forbid the boys'. In other words, the family and wider community of relatives endeavours to monitor and direct young people to becoming moral agents through restriction.

Young people often live with their family until they marry. It would be improper to invite a young man home, or to visit his

home. Moreover, it is difficult for a young woman to go out in public with a man who is not her relative. Such behaviour is likely to generate scandalous gossip (*öse*). If a young woman is suspected of indecent behaviour, the monitoring of her is likely to sharpen. Similarly, it is considered unsafe to let a girl sleep on her own in a separate bedroom within the family home. She cannot be trusted to remain chaste or to protect herself against potential intruders. A girl should not walk around town or in the countryside on her own, since she might be seen to have 'opened herself' to advances from strangers. What is important is not that any indecency has actually been observed, but rather its potential. Similarly, the 'wedding night' does not necessarily result in the kidnapped bride losing her virginity, but the potential for this alone is sufficient to 'spoil' her status.

Gossip as social control

If a young woman wishes to leave her kidnappers, she must politely fend off her potential in-laws. She has to consider her parents wishes and her own willingness to disobey them. Moreover, she has to consider her own reduced options and 'ruined' standing in the community, which will be the subject of widely circulating gossip. In this context, scandalous gossip might be considered a social control mechanism, employed by community members to assess others' actions and publicly express such assessments, and, in turn, a means of directing young people's behaviour.

While scandalous gossip affects young women's options, it is also a tool on which they rely and to which they actively contribute. Because it is difficult to get to know men who are not relatives, young women rely on gossip to build a picture of whether someone would be a desirable suitor. Young women often comment that they hope to glean from the available gossip whether an eligible man has a tendency to drink (vodka) or is predisposed to violence. Should he have such tendencies, it would be advantageous if he were physically smaller than her, so that she might restrain him.

Moreover, gossip does not continually reproduce the same repertoire of interpretations. Through her actions, and aided by the community's propensity for scandalous gossip,

Maira set an example which other young women draw on in considering their own options. Perhaps her example acts as a deterrent, or perhaps because of its outcome it acts as a lead to follow. A few years after her kidnap, Maira married a young man of her choice. They live with his mother in the village where she continues to work as a teacher, and they have a small child. Maira still meets with abuse from her kidnapper's allies when she is in town. As if putting the event behind her, she never talks about her kidnapping. Through her choices, she paved a route to becoming a morally acceptable actor within the community, as a hardworking and obedient daughter-in-law, wife and mother, but a route perhaps more closely moulded to her own inclinations.

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All names have been changed in this essay.

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