Synopsis:

Ala kachuu

"Bride snatching"

Kyrgyzstan, July 2004

« It's our tradition, we can't abolish it. »

There's just one small problem: this tradition, Ala kachuu ("running away with something that doesn't belong to you"), is illegal. The Kirghiz Penal Code outlaws forced marriages. A man who kidnaps a woman and forces her to marry him can theoretically be prosecuted. In reality, Article 155 is very rarely enforced.

This practice was made illegal under Soviet law in the 1920s when the U.S.S.R. annexed Kyrgyzstan. But since its independence in 1991, this small Central Asian country of 4.500.000 inhabitants has witnessed a steady increase in the number of non consensual bride-kidnappings.

There are two major reasons for this. In these post-Soviet times, the Kirghiz, who represent 58% of the population, are eager to strengthen their identity, eroded during 70 years of Soviet hegemony. Reviving what they consider to be an ancestral tradition is one way of achieving that goal, and almost all the kidnappings take place among the ethnic Kirghiz. The other major reason is that Kyrgyzstan is a poor country. The Russians massively left the country after 1991. Factories shut down because there were no qualified Kirghiz to keep them running, because financing became insufficient or simply because spare parts were unavailable. Today, the Kirghiz GNP is entirely devoted to servicing the country's foreign debt and the economy is in dire straits. High unemployment is a problem for the young as well as for their parents, and can even reach 40% in the villages.

According to custom, a man wanting to marry must pay a sizeable dowry to the girl's parents, in addition to the "bride price". The per capita yearly income in 2004 being around $280, men and their families are increasingly unable to cover these important expenses. Kidnapping one's future wife is a way of economizing the bride price.

Other reasons cited for undertaking Ala kachuu: the girl's parents might not agree to the marriage; the girl might refuse the marriage proposal; to keep the girl from marrying someone else.

Available studies indicate that between 35% and 45% of Kirghiz women marry against their will.

Whether kidnapped off the street or invited to go with friends to a "party", the women are brought to the "husband's" family's house, where quite often the guests are already assembled. The woman finds herself at her own wedding ! Naturally, all the women resist and fight, but how can one woman break away from three or four men who force her into a car?

All women refuse at first and demand to be released. Social pressure and tradition weigh heavily, however, on the woman to conform and accept the marriage. A woman who refuses loses her reputation, especially if she has been held overnight at the kidnapper's family's home. Going against tradition brings shame and disapproval on her and her family who, except on rare occasion, order her to stay. If despite all the pressure, the woman is obstinate in wanting to leave, the old women threaten to curse her (that she never find a husband, that she remain childless, that she never find her road in life, etc.) and succeed in breaking down her will to resist. Superstitious fear of the old women's curses is real, be it among university students or village girls. It requires true force of character to succeed in obtaining one's release, as well as a promise not to go to the police... Only 8% to 10% of kidnappings do not result in marriage, and divorces are even rarer (6%) because culturally frowned upon.

Ala kachuu likely made sense, and even had some utility, when Kirghiz society was composed of nomadic tribes. But at the dawn of the 21st century, this ancient tradition, spreading for reasons both economic and having to do with quest for national identity, derides human rights, clearly violating Article 16 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. **The violence of Ala kachuu denies the dreams and aspirations of the women who are its victims.**

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