MARRIAGE IN FORM, TRAFFICKING IN CONTENT:

Non-consensual Bride Kidnapping in Contemporary Kyrgyzstan

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Abstract

Despite ratifying multiple international human rights conventions, democratizing national legislation, and increasing women's presence in the government, non-consensual bride kidnapping has become a rampant practice in Kyrgyzstan. This paper seeks to answer why bride kidnapping is on the rise in light of the government's progressive efforts; it further seeks to understand the cultural significance of the practice in Kyrgyz society to suggest a novel understanding in the context of human trafficking. An answer to this question sheds light on the impact of Russo-Soviet rule, failures in policy initiatives and implementation post-independence as well as existing gaps in the general conceptualization of the practice. This paper argues, first, that modern-day perceptions of Kyrgyzness are by and large a product of destabilizing Russo-Soviet policies as well as the effect of the constructed historical discourse post-independence. Second, it examines the practice's proliferation in light of recent progressive efforts taken up by the Kyrgyz state, viewing them as having economic priorities in mind, and not those of its citizens. Third, it proposes that in framing non-consensual bride kidnapping as a form of human trafficking, national and international pressure could elicit change under a more legitimatized premise. Drawing from scholarly literature, documentaries on bride kidnapping, and international human rights legislation, this paper suggests that Kyrgyz identity is not fixed and as such, the understanding of non-consensual bride kidnapping as a Kyrgyz tradition arises as a two-fold effort to assert ethnic Kyrgyzness and construct a national identity.

Introduction

It is said that, in the past, when a Kyrgyz man set eyes on the woman he wanted to marry he would ask her father for the permission to challenge her to a horse race. If the father agreed, the daughter would be given a 15-second head start on her horse as well as a thick leather whip to fend off the suitor's potential advances. If the man managed to capture the woman and kiss her, all while on horseback and despite the danger of being whipped, then he would earn 'the right' to ask for the woman's hand in marriage. This practice, called *kyzkummay* or 'kiss the girl,' has transitioned from courtship ritual to national game, becoming one of Kyrgyzstan's many equestrian sports (Handrahan 2004: 209).[1] Standards for courtship and marriage, on the other hand, have taken a drastic change of course.

Today, the common conjugal experience in modern-day Kyrgyzstan can be summed up in one Kyrgyz proverb: "Every good marriage begins with tears." Rather than anticipating one's wedding day with jittery excitement, planning ahead for the perfect ceremony, a rural Kyrgyz woman could be going about her day, buying groceries at the local market for instance, and be suddenly snatched up by a strange man, her husband-to-be, and his accomplices.[2] After being forcibly stuffed into a complicit driver's car, she is then taken to the kidnapper's home, despite exhibiting vehement resistance. Upon her arrival she is cornered by her future mother-in-law and other women; they will then collectively struggle for hours on end with the bride, in an attempt to pressure her to stay, often physically restraining her but always reassuring that if she were to remain everything would be fine as "they, too, were once kidnapped" (Lom 2004). Few women are lucky enough to resist and be released; in fact, most "choose" to stay. It is widely considered

[1] VICE correspondent Thomas Morton is shown at a kökbörü match in Bishkek at the start of the video; kökbörü resembles polo but instead of being played with a mallet and small plastic ball, a headless goat's carcass and larger ball are used (VICE 2011).

[2] Although bride kidnapping also occurs in major cities, it is more common in the rural regions of Kyrgyzstan. This is particularly significant when considering that about two-thirds of the Kyrgyz population resides in rural villages.

that Kyrgyz men have secured a wife in this way for centuries, by practicing *kyz ala kachuu* in accordance with Kyrgyz *adat,* or traditional customary law (Kleinbach and Salimjanova 2007). *Ala kachuu*, the Kyrgyz term for bride kidnapping, means 'to take and to flee', illustrating that the term is no misnomer. While some kidnappings occur with the prior knowledge and consent of either the bride-to-be or her parents (or both), it is increasingly the case that the women who are kidnapped have never met, let alone thought of marrying, their kidnappers.

In a country where women hold 23.3 percent of the seats in the National Parliament (IPU 2012), the fact that no concrete legislative measures have been taken to deter men from engaging in non-consensual bride kidnapping raises a number of questions. The sole initiative taken thus far has been the implementation of a law in 2003, rendering bride kidnapping illegal under Article 155 of the Kyrgyz Criminal Code (Trilling 2012). Similarly, the Kyrgyz government, since obtaining its independence from the Soviet Union in 1991, has ratified multiple international human rights treaties and conventions upholding women's rights. Still, because bride kidnappings are reported to and dealt with by local authorities, such as the police or the *aksakals*, [3] and are often resolved "according to Kyrgyz tradition", reconciliation takes precedence over judicial redress (Ranjbar 2012; Alkon 2007). Concurrently, the Kyrgyz are experiencing a "religious revival" (O'Neill 2012: 290); it is the *mullahs*, or Muslim clerics, who often "help affirm a forced union," giving it religious legitimacy through the Islamic marriage ceremony (*nikaah*), blatantly ignoring the fact that forced marriages are profoundly frowned upon in Islam (Rickleton 2012a).

This paper seeks to answer the following questions: why has non-consensual bride kidnapping become a more prevalent practice in Kyrgyzstan, in light of recent, progressive legislative measures? What value does bride kidnapping hold in Kyrgyz society? How is the

[3] *Aksakal* literally means "white beard" and refers to the council of elders found in every rural village.

practice reinforced by the Kyrgyz government's neglect or social actors? Can non-consensual bride kidnapping be simply ascribed to cultural difference or is there room for legal enforcement of universally recognized human rights law?

This paper begins by examining the effect of Russian colonial and Soviet influence on the construction of ethnic Kyrgyz identity. It argues that this influence has fundamentally destabilized ethnic identity and normalized bride kidnapping by granting it a social, moral, and political value. It later shows how despite espousing a progressive human rights and women's rights agenda, the Kyrgyz government has been merely trying to preserve its image in the international sphere, hoping to promote foreign investment and national economic growth – not that of its social institutions. Thus, non-consensual bride kidnapping is examined as a product of the Kyrgyz government's conscious neglect and tacit approval. It concludes by suggesting a renewed understanding of the practice as a form of human trafficking; framing it as such could further efforts in favor of the practice's eradication.

In order to answer the proposed research question, this paper draws from a variety of sources, engaging literature on Kyrgyz and Central Asian history, Imperial Russian and Soviet policies in Central Asia, anthropological accounts of bride kidnapping in Kyrgyzstan and beyond, economic reform and democratization, commitment theory, and human trafficking. It gathers further evidence from reports published by international organizations and primary sources, such as newspaper articles and selections of relevant legislation, as well as personal narratives.

Although the Kyrgyz government does not collect statistical data on non-consensual bride kidnapping, the practice has in fact been on the rise in Kyrgyzstan in recent years, as confirmed through scholars' and various organizations' ethnographic research. This analysis

considers the historically grounded institutions and contemporary conditions that have allowed for non-consensual bride kidnapping to become accepted in Kyrgyzstan. As of now, scholars have treated this phenomenon as resulting from either deeply entrenched cultural norms or government inaction. This analysis brings together these two viewpoints and deploys a new interpretation of non-consensual bride kidnapping as human trafficking. Whether or not such framing will allow Kyrgyz civil society to gain more leverage in combatting the practice is yet to be seen. Nonetheless, examining it as an act of human trafficking can prove beneficial in future analyses and contribute to discussions on violence against women.

To that end, this paper proceeds as follows. The first section details traditional marriage practices in Kyrgyzstan to delve into an examination of the effects of Russo-Soviet policies on Kyrgyz customs and identity. Next, an examination of Kyrgyzstan's political history post-independence highlights the continuation of this Russo-Soviet legacy, demonstrating how economic priorities led to the ratification of numerous human rights conventions and treaties, although these ratifications have failed to be enforced. The second section explores the social and political value of non-consensual bride kidnapping in Kyrgyz society. In the third section, the paper focuses on the definition of human trafficking to point out its parallels with non-consensual bride kidnapping. The paper concludes with a discussion of recent developments and the role of Kyrgyz civil society in effecting change.

I. Kyrgyz Traditions and History

Marriage Practices among the Peoples of the Silk Road

The historical record on Kyrgyz customs and traditions reveals that although bride kidnapping took place prior to Russian and Soviet rule, the practice was neither common nor

accepted as a part of Kyrgyz *adat*, "traditional customary law," or *Sharia*, Islamic law (Kleinbach and Salimjanova 2007: 217). In fact, pre-Soviet law made bride kidnapping a crime punishable by fine circa 1908.[4] Furthermore, when non-consensual bride kidnappings occurred they often caused clan conflicts resulting in violent raids and killings, as evinced by N. A. Aristov's ethnographic work.[5] Consensual bride kidnappings were also a reality, nonetheless, commonly referred to as staged or mock kidnappings, or elopements (Handrahan 2000: 209). These were carried out by Kyrgyz youth who wanted to avoid arranged marriages and bypass their parents' consent (Kleinbach and Salimjanova 220-221). Parental acquiescence to kidnappings was often mediated by economic considerations; approval was granted in the hopes of reducing the cost of marriage. Kidnappings eliminated the need to spend money on a wedding celebration (*toi*) and not only delayed the payment of the bride price (*kalym*), but significantly reduced it; it also presented a fast-track to marriage. Despite the few instances in which consensual bride kidnappings occurred, either consented to by the couple in question or possibly their parents, arranged marriage was the norm (id; Abazov 2007: 216), along with the payment of the bride price and the realization of a proper wedding ceremony – such was true for Central Asia at large.

Arranged marriages throughout Central Asia were instrumental in the preservation of established social structures and stability, in which both the family and community played crucial roles. Parental consent was critical, as they often financed the wedding, the purchase of a new home for the couple, and the payment of the bride price. Weddings also created a venue for establishing social relationships among newlyweds, extended family, and prominent community

[4] Sixty head of cattle, for example, was the specified fine for the abduction of a married woman, while 40 head of cattle and 100 rubles was the fine for the abduction of a girl who was promised in marriage; similar fines were dealt to those who kidnapped young girls not promised in marriage.

[5] Aristov wrote of a conflict that arose between the Sayak and Salt tribes circa 1863 when a young woman promised to a Salt noble was captured by a Sayak man. Cf. Kleinbach and Salimjanova 221-223.

members who were invited and might later help the bride or groom in future endeavors. Unions that resulted from arranged marriages were in the interest of the community, as they "ma[de] sure that every member [in the community] had a partner through arrangements, [and] not through competition." Moreover, unions often cemented partnerships between the two families and kinship clans involved, while "ensur[ing] the continuity of two honorable and respected lineages." Strong relations with one's community meant having an even stronger "social safety net." Overall, weddings carried symbolic meaning as rites of passage, marking the start of the newlyweds' adulthood. In addition, Islamic clerics were often invited to perform the nikaah marriage ceremony, increasing the ceremony's symbolic value while simultaneously affirming Islamic identity and principles (Abazov 2007: 217, 224-226).

Traditional marriage practices sustained both ethnic and Islamic tradition and were further reinforced through family life. At once, newlyweds were "expected to establish a family" after moving into the groom's parents' home.[6] The formation of these joint, "traditional families" allowed them to remain "an extremely effective survival unit," capable of overcoming times of socio-economic instability. However, such domestic arrangements also imposed "strict gender-age hierarchies," "conformity" (id: 226-227), as well as, I argue, complicity in abuses of individual family members for the sustained welfare of the family as a whole. As it turns out, a young bride occupies the lowest position in the household. Upon becoming a part of the family, she is placed under the supervision of her mother-in-law,[7] who then exerts "extensive control

[6] Earlier it was mentioned that parents often "purchased a home for new couples"; this was true among certain families but traditionally, the newlyweds would initially move into the groom's parents' home.

[7] Or oldest wife, in cases of polygamy. Polygamy and polygyny are often used interchangeably, although polygamy refers to the practice of having more than one spouse while polygyny refers to situations where one man has multiple wives. Similarly, polyandry refers to the act of one woman having multiple husbands. Although polygyny may be the more precise term, polygamy will be used throughout the paper, as my sources have.

over her" (HRW 2006: 9).[8] After marriage, few women continue their education, feeling consumed and, above all, trapped by their household duties (HRW 2006: 96). While such practices have held an indispensable socio-economic significance in the lives of Kyrgyz people until today, as we will later discuss, they held no such value for the Imperial Russian authorities who first encountered the Central Asian peoples.

In the mid-nineteenth century, when Russian officials first expressed an interest in the territory that now encompasses Kyrgyzstan and the other nations of Central Asia, the Russian Empire aspired to establish stable contact with the region for its "goods, [to] secur[e] the land trade routes with Persia and India, and [to] [halt] the British advance from their bases in northern India toward Afghanistan and Central Asia" (Abazov 2007: 35).[9] It was the Bolsheviks, after 1917, who found Kyrgyz women's place in society at odds with socialist, egalitarian ideals, concluding that nomadic traditions were the "primary obstacle[s] to educating Kyrgyz women" and, more importantly, achieving their revolutionary goals. Subsequently, they set out on a 70 year-long campaign to press the Kyrgyz to abandon their "backward", nomadic customs (Iğmen 2012: 126-127).

Russo-Soviet Intervention, Nomadic Destabilization

Imperial Russian Rule: Setting the Stage for Soviet Control

Early on, the Russian Empire endeavored to reconfigure Central Asian natives' self-perception. The Russians first encountered Central Asia following the period after the disintegration of the Tamerlane Empire and the rise of three khanates,[10] all of which had been "constantly weaken[ing] one another in never-ending quarrels," contributing to each other's

[8] A young bride is expected to give her mother-in-law "complete obedience and service;" the mother-in-law often determines a young bride's daily schedule, the work she has to do around the house, when she is allowed to leave the house or have contact with others, and even decisions regarding sex (HRW 2006: 9).
[9] This "race for influence" between Russia and Britain is also known as the Great Game.
[10] A khanate denotes the realm controlled by a khan. The three were the Bukhara, Khiva, and Kokand khanates.

economic devastation and collective failure to "modernize their armies, political systems, or economies," which ultimately left them "weak oriental despotic states." Thus, the Russian Empire was able to subjugate and dominate them just before the end of the nineteenth century (Abazov 2007: 33-36).

At the time, Russian officials knew the Central Asians as simply "Asiatic" peoples, a term illustrating both their awareness of the "ethnic differences between the Russian and non-Russian subjects of the empire," but also their lack of understanding of what exactly differentiated them. According to Iğmen, the Russians categorized them according to their "languages, religious practices, and *byt* (everyday life)" in order to assign them "new community characteristics" they could comprehend. Such categories were "imprecise" and a direct reflection of the Russians' ignorance of their neighbors as well as their hesitation to either create a "unified Russian community." Above all, they wanted Central Asians to be "obedient and loyal citizens" and, thus, eventually began granting citizenship, or *grazhdanstvennost*, to "non-Russian imperial subjects." This measure "undermined kinship relationships," "promoted local self-government," and "reformed and reestablished local justice systems" (Iğmen 2012: 11-12). Such destabilizations were to become commonplace amongst Central Asians under Imperial Russian rule. As a result, the "meaning of Kyrgyzness [had been] subject to change," just as the composition of Kyrgyz ethnic communities was always "in flux" (Iğmen 2012: 9). The destabilization was not only the product of new citizenship policies but economic as well. Russian capitalist policies weakened fundamental elements of Central Asian society, [11] undermining "traditional lifestyles" centered on "barter (exchange) trade with… neighbors" and "the nucleus of traditional Central Asian society," the extended family (Abazov 2007: 36). Such

[11] Such as the introduction of new, speedier modes of transportation, the change from subsistence agriculture to commercial crop cultivation and animal husbandry, as well as the introduction of wage labor and the transformation of market relations.

policies initiated the gradual disintegration of the social fabric and understandings of authentic Kyrgyzness.

Following Ivan the Terrible's reign, the tsar who first advanced into Central Asia, subsequent rulers, and in particular Catherine the Great, set out to "sedentarize and 'civilize' [the] nomads;" citizenship was, once again, viewed as the stabilizing force. However, as the terms of citizenship were negotiated between "imperial administrators and… non-Russian elites," local leaders were able to assert their influence by ensuring that "the Russian construction of citizenship" was never successfully imposed on the Central Asian peoples. Yet, even local leaders lost their leverage within the Russian Empire as it "centralized [its] administration," causing alliances to transform into hostile relationships. Thinking that Central Asians would eventually realize "the superiority of sedentarism" and that Muslims would simply "assimilate into Russian society," Russian elites began to establish a "discourse of Russian superiority" in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. However, uprisings significantly undermined their efforts.[12] Such altercations, and its historical collective memory, debilitated Russian efforts to fully integrate and civilize the Central Asian peoples (Iğmen 2012: 13-15). Sedentarization and efforts to engender a sense of *narodnost'* or nationality among the peoples of Central Asia required ethnic groups to form "full-fledged nationalities." However, this was not achieved until the Bolsheviks assumed control. Still, it is clear the Russian Empire "laid the foundation" for future Bolshevik policies, namely the Soviet policy of *korenizatsiia*, or nativization, which involved "the promotion of indigenous cadres in the organs of government" (Iğmen 2012: 9-11, 14).

[12] First, the revolution in 1905 and then the one in 1917, or the Great October Revolution, resulted in the establishment of Bolshevik control; second, the creation of the "October Manifesto," a document that, by bestowing "civil rights for all nationalities," promoted "legitimate nationalist movements." These violent uprisings that resulted were met with equal force from the White Army, or the Imperial Russian Army.

Soviet Rule in the 1920s and 1930s: Cementing Contradictions

Under Soviet rule, Kyrgyz society underwent a series of long-lasting social, cultural, economic, and political transformations, culminating in its collective identification as Kyrgyz. The peoples of Central Asia, although now defined by the clear-cut nation-states we now refer to as Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan (see Appendix A), had no existing territorial boundaries and, subsequently, no unifying sense of national identity. Prior to 1917, identity was mediated by clan and tribal affiliations, cultures, and linguistic distinctions (Abazov 2007: 37; Jones Luong 2004: 7). Under Russian rule, Kyrgyz *manachys*and *akyns*[13] expressed the "grievances" of the Kyrgyz people and promoted unity among both the Kyrgyz and the Kazakhs[14] by fomenting sentiments of "ethnic nationalism" aimed at effectively "resist[ing] Russian colonial control" and mobilizing "against the foreign enemy." They did, however, acknowledged the virtues in select Soviet teachings and the importance of adopting these to Kyrgyz culture (Iğmen 2012: 18-19).[15] Influential figures in Kyrgyz society, such as the bards, tried to "redefine their communities" as they realized that there existed "no single, permanent image of [the] ethnic Kyrgyz… national community." For the Soviets, the meaning of Kyrgyzness was a "challenging question" (Iğmen 2012: 20) – one they set out to reconcile through a cultural revolution aimed at making Soviet citizens out of the Kyrgyz and the other peoples of Central Asia.

Soviet policies, in essence, discarded unwanted parts of both the Russian and Kyrgyz past, as Russia was considered to have had a "backward history and image" parallel to the

[13] *Manaschys* and *akyns* are bards that compose and sign their own songs and are considered respected leaders in the Kyrgyz community (Iğmen 2012: 181). *Manaschys*, however, specialize in reciting the national epic *Manas* (Iğmen 2012: 18).

[14] Kazakhs and Kyrgyz were often discussed as one single entity as they were the two major nomadic groups in Central Asia. For a long time the Soviets categorized the Kazakhs as "Kyrgyz" and the Kyrgyz as "Kara-Kyrgyz", literally meaning "Dark Kyrgyz" (Iğmen 2012: 26).

[15] Toktogul Satylganov, for instance, a famous and revered *akyn*, praised those who showed a strong work ethic and condemned those who did not, calling them "failures and freeloaders."

Kyrgyz's perceived "backward," "ignorant," and "indigenous" way of life. For instance, traditions of "engagement, marriage, and funeral rights, recitation of national and ancestral myths, and oral narratives of imagined oral history" were all seen as "being in need of reform" (Iğmen 2012: 46). At the same time, they selected favorable parts of the past to forge a new Soviet history and accompanying identity. Embracing all that was Soviet, rather than clinging to past Russian or Kyrgyz ideas, was seen as a way to bring "improvement" and "development," centered on a "language of renewal" (Iğmen 2012: 41; 36). For example, "sacred markers of Kyrgyz 'tradition'" were used at the Soviets' discretion for their political aims (id). Mountain ranges were depicted on "handicrafts, Soviet and post-Soviet monuments, flags, medals, and other national markers of honor," and the same was true for "horses, *kymyz*, *komuz*, and [the] *bozui*" (Iğmen 2012: 48).[16] Moreover, Bolshevik policies focused on "enlightening the locals" were virtually an extension of the Imperial Russian policy preoccupied with "civilizing the natives." The process by which certain aspects were either discarded or preserved in order to fuse the Kyrgyz past with the burgeoning idea of Sovietness made for policies that simultaneously, and paradoxically, advocated for Soviet unity alongside the preservation of national customs (id: 25-26). Such paradoxes served as the foundation for a Kyrgyz identity that, as I argue, has grown to be as mutable and contradictory as these very policies, allowing for non-consensual bride kidnapping to be considered 'a Kyrgyz tradition.'

As Islam and nomadism were thought of as the main adversaries of socialist ideology, Soviet policies in the 1920s and 1930s set out to eradicate them. Under Josef Stalin, a "policy of atheism" was instituted, closing down mosques and *madrasas*[17] and prohibiting religious

[16] *Kymyz* is the national Kyrgyz drink, made of fermented milk. The *komuz* is the national Kyrgyz instrument, a small, three-stringed guitar. The *bozui* is the Kyrgyz term for the nomadic yurt.
[17] *Madrasa* is the Arabic word for school. In this context it refers to Islamic seminaries (Iğmen 2012: 29).

worship.[18] Members of the old national intelligentsia were either exiled or executed (Abazov 2007: 46), and replaced by "secularized people," who became the "new civilizing force" (Iğmen 2012: 31). Although Soviet efforts in Kyrgyzstan were aimed primarily at eradicating nomadism, it cannot be denied that nomadism and Islam coexisted within the same realm. The kind of Islam the Kyrgyz practice allows for "pre-Islamic habits and rituals to be components of their belief system" and therefore enriches their religion with "centuries-old spiritual beliefs," such as their "spiritual attachment to nature" (Iğmen 2012: 51-52). Thus, elements of nomadism persisted, such as the renunciation of belongings restricting movement such as "permanent dwellings, books, furniture, or bulky arts and crafts" (Iğmen 2012: 25). This untamed sense of freedom, however, was exactly what the Soviets fought most to repress by introducing the *kolkhozes*, or Soviet collective farms, and demanding that every farmer join these agricultural cooperatives and sedentarize (Iğmen 2012: 33).[19] The process of collectivization, and subsequent sedentarization, was largely completed by the 1930s, having as profound an effect on Kyrgyz society as Imperial Russian nationalization and capitalist policies once had. It allowed Soviet authorities to easily "impose changes in social and political behavior" and carry out the so-called "cultural revolution" (Abazov 2007: 43), a process that encompassed the changes made regarding Islam and nomadism as well as other efforts carried out through education targeting school-age

[18] Among the Uzbeks especially, who had a long tradition of wearing *paranjas*, or the "head-to-toe veil" we have come to know as the *burqa*, and less so among the Kyrgyz, whose small headscarves were not considered religious symbols, the Soviets began a controversial campaign against veiling, also known as *hujum*. In terms of veiling, nomadic Kyrgyz women were considered "nominal Muslims" (Iğmen 2012: 122-124); thus, the main focus in Kyrgyzstan was placed mainly on nomadic culture.

[19] This initiative was primarily motivated as an attempt to increase agricultural productivity, in an effort to rebuild the economy after the civil war (Abazov 2007: 42-43). Many Kyrgyz nomads resisted these efforts by "destroy[ing] their own livestock," hoping to hinder Soviet productivity. In reality, they were only successful in self-inflicted sabotage, condemning themselves to starvation and punishment (Iğmen 2012: 31).

children and adults in both schools and at the Houses of Culture, or clubs, located in every *ail*, or village.[20]

Women's education also became a great concern for the Soviets as women were seen as the "purveyors of tradition" (Iğmen 2012: 135), although regrettably "ignorant, helpless, and neglected."[21] The Soviets blamed women's plight on established traditions that rested on patriarchal social structures enmeshed with Islamic and nomadic teachings (Iğmen 2012: 132). Thus, women were "rounded up" from their homes and forced to attend club meetings centered on subjects like hygiene and bride price (id: 54).[22] Ironically enough, Kyrgyz women pined for pre-Soviet times, when "both girls and boys freely rode their horses" and gender equality was an almost tangible reality, something they "revered… as unique among Central Asian Muslims" (Iğmen 2012: 49-50). In all likelihood, Soviet perceptions were misinformed by what they encountered among the neighboring Uzbeks.[23]

As discussed above, the ways in which the Soviets set out to change the Kyrgyz, either by coercion or education, were contradictory; particularly, during the 1920s and 1930s, within the early Stalin era, ethnic cultures were both paid tribute to and suppressed for the sake of

[20] The activities hosted in clubs were meant to enmesh "socialist education" with "sensible entertainment" (Iğmen 2012: 39). Eventually, Russian-language instruction was considered a very important unifying factor and an effective means through which to teach the "new Soviet ways". Still, it was the linguistic differences the Soviets identified among the sedentary and nomadic populations of Central Asia that had allowed for the Soviets to "define the region's geographic and political boundaries" (Iğmen 2012: 65). In historical terms, education became secular in the 1920s; gradually, more girls began attending elementary school alongside boys. An "official history of the revolutionary period," highlighting the "voluntary participation" of village leaders in the revolution, was taught alongside the importance of rejecting the "oppressive culture of their [previous] religious and administrative" leaders (Iğmen 2012: 26-27). However, the main goal was to "stamp out illiteracy" (id: 32), one of the main hindrances to establishing a proletariat class. Yet, redefining Kyrgyz culture was just as important as teaching the Kyrgyz to be cultured. In other words, having culture meant exhibiting "civilized" behavior or "possessing knowledge and having an interest in the arts or literature" (Iğmen 2012: 28).

[21] Although the Soviets presented themselves as champions of women's rights, they did not champion the rights of their own, Russian women; in fact, "Soviet policy… prevented even Russian [women]… from reaching high-level positions in the regime" (Iğmen 2012: 132).

[22] While some women's husbands forbade them from attending local clubs, others simply did not have the means to travel to the nearest one, while others were so overwhelmed with "daily tasks and duties" that they were "left very little time… to do anything else" (Iğmen 2012: 127).

[23] The observance of Islamic customs was much more prominent among the Uzbeks at the time, and still today.

cementing a national Soviet identity. Two policies in particular formed the basis for the instability of Kyrgyz identity: the first was "the coming together of cultures," otherwise known as *slianiie*, and the second the policy of nativization (Iğmen 2012: 57). Thus, while people were "told to see their communit[ies] in a new light: less Kyrgyz, more Soviet," the Soviets emphasized local traditions to "entice people to attend education institutions and meetings" (Iğmen 2012: 33, 26). Therefore, the success of these policies was dependent upon the people's own cooperation, which could, in turn, only be achieved by paradoxically promoting the ethnic traditions and customs observed in the different regions. Similarly, it required the active involvement of local leaders. However, by placing native leaders in Soviet leadership positions, they were able to become more than just passive recipients of Soviet culture. Instead, they were actively involved in the "defin[ition], perform[ance], and enforce[ment] of Kyrgyzness within the new system." In sum, they took part in the creation of the Kyrgyz community as we know it today, one that is "Kyrgyz in form but Soviet in content" (Iğmen 2012: 39; 36).

Post-Stalin Soviet Rule: Ethnic Renewal

Josef Stalin led the USSR for almost 30 years, from 1922 to 1953. Arguably, the policies he implemented in Central Asia were the most radical and influential, despite never having developed into "clear polic[ies]" (Iğmen 2012: 24). Although Stalin's immediate successor, Nikita Khrushchev, denounced Stalinist policies and particularly the "mass purges" that took place early on under his rule, his own policies were introduced "in a very inconsistent manner" (id).[24] The next Soviet leader, Leonid Brezhnev, led the USSR from 1966 to 1982 and concentrated on further industrialization but his efforts were undermined by the spreading

[24] Khrushchev focused on "liberalizing" intellectual and cultural production and "economic planning," but maintained "an iron curtain" and often failed in his endeavors, such as his plan for mass agricultural production that left many starving. Khrushchev ruled from 1956 until 1964, when a "peaceful 'palace coup'" resulted in his removal from office.

corruption and internal division within the Communist Party (Abazov 2007: 40-41). These Soviet leaders, however, began a larger process of Russification in the 1960s and 1970s, whereby Russian became the preferred language in education and literature, essentially displacing the use of Kyrgyz and the other indigenous languages of the USSR.[25] Early on in this era, Chinghiz Aitmatov, arguably the most prominent Kyrgyz writer, coined the term *Mankourtisation*, or the "forgetting of roots," to call attention to the way in which "people [were] increasingly los[ing] their sense of cultural heritage and faced the destruction of the traditional fabric of society" (Abazov 2007: 47).[26] A *mankourt* referred to anyone who could no longer remember his *jeti ata*, literally one's 'seven fathers' or "the preceding seven generations of a person's patrilineage" (Gullette 2010: 3-4). Thus, literature helped spark the process of reclaiming Kyrgyz ethnic culture and identity, in direct opposition to Russification.

In fact, when Mikhail Gorbachev assumed power in early 1985,[27] there was a "mass movement" that pushed for the recognition of Kyrgyz as a "state language," having been given such status in 1989.[28] Furthermore, Gorbachev announced he would be a "new breed of Soviet leader" (Hanks 2005: 327). In an effort to undo the very policies that had driven the Soviet Union into crisis, Gorbachev implemented policies of restructuring, or *perestroika*, and openness, or *glasnost* (Abazov 2007: 48; Hanks 2005: 327). Such policies supported the reclaiming of ethnic culture and identity, but were very much mediated by revolutionary notions of the past and constraining realities in the present.

[25] While more than 20,000 books and brochures were published between 1925 and 1971 in Russian, the one Kyrgyz publishing house had just "a few dozen titles listed" in Kyrgyz.
[26] Aitmatov coined the term in his celebrated novel *The Day Lasts More Than a Hundred Years* (1980) as a synonym for slave, or someone deprived of their "selfhood." In the novel, makourtisation was caused when the udder of a nursing mother camel, or *shiri*, was placed on the head of a slave. As it dried, it would constrict the head, eventually causing the mankourt to either die or to "los[e] his memory of the past forever" (Gullette 2010: 89-90).
[27] Gorbachev came into power after the short terms of Yuri Andropov and Konstantin Chernenko, which lasted from 1982 to 1984 and from 1984 to 1985 respectively.
[28] Abazov (2007) claims this to have taken place in 1990.

It is in this context that non-consensual bride kidnapping emerged as an accepted practice. Just as the Kyrgyz were beginning to reclaim their past, the practice was adopted as another marker of Kyrgyz identity, initially suppressed under Soviet rule. Between the 1950s and 1970s, instances of arranged marriage decreased while "non-traditional 'Komsomol' marriages"[29] and bride kidnapping became more popular forms of marriage. Both forms of marriage provided a more economic alternative, as the Komsomol marriage was considered a "frugal wedding," involving only a small ceremony at the civil registry. Furthermore, bride kidnapping became more prominent in the 1970s as "average wedding expenses increased" (Werner 2009: 326).

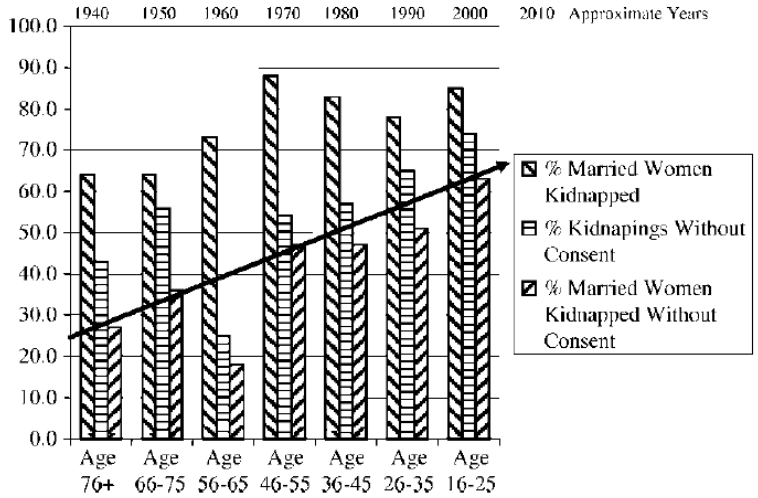

Figure 1. Frequency of kidnapping and consent level over time (Kleinback, Ablezova, and Aitieva 2005: 198).

Kleinbach, Ablezova, and Aitieva's study shows how in at least the latter part of the 20th century, "there was a gradual increase" in non-consensual bride kidnappings that persisted "until the practice had evolved and become quite common" (2005: 193), as seen in Figure 1 above.[30]

[29] The Communist Union of Youth of Kyrgyzstan (Abazov 2004: 166).

[30] Kleinbach's team surveyed all women age 16 and above in a Kyrgyz village located in the north-eastern region of Kyrgyzstan, the name of which has been concealed out of the respect of its residents' privacy. Out of the 504 households in the village, 424 were canvassed by ten teams over a period of about 4 days, collecting 564 questionnaires. Research in this village was facilitated by community contacts familiar with the research team, all faculty members at the American University of Central Asia. The project was also preapproved and endorsed by the village council. The results of this study combine previous research conducted in both 1999 and 2001, which

Such claims are supported by the fact that "registered marriages fell from 40,341 in 1985 to 26,807 in 1995, despite a younger population" (Bauer, Green, Keuhnast 1997: 23), as non-consensual bride kidnappings are seldom registered through the state. The study found that only 34 percent of women consented to their kidnappings, while 46 percent were kidnapped through deception and 18 percent by physical force (Kleinbach, Ablezova, and Aitieva 2005: 195-196). At the time when the study was conducted, 27 percent of women seventy-six years or older were married after a non-consensual kidnapping; for women between 36 and 56 years of age that number rose to 47 percent; and, for women between 16 and 25 years of age that number increased even more dramatically to 63 percent (see Table 1 below).

Age	Married women kidnapped (%)	Kidnappings without consent* (%)	Married women, kidnapped without consent (%)	Number of respondents
76 +	64	43	27	11
66–75	64	56	36	36
56–65	73	25	18	44
46–55	88	54	47	82
36–45	83	57	47	126
26–35	78	65	51	87
16–25	85	75	63	117
Average	80	57	45	503

*By deception or force, not in love and woman not wanting to be kidnapped.

Table 1. Village kidnapping frequency and consent level (Kleinbach, Abolezova, Aitieva 2005: 197).

Thus, we see that younger women are entering into marriages as a direct result of non-consensual kidnappings at drastically higher rates than women were in the past. The study suggests an overall rise in non-consensual and consensual bride kidnapping over the last 50 years or so (Kleinbach, Ablezova, and Aitieva 2005: 197-198). Subsequent studies have only confirmed these findings: one study carried out in 2010 and 2011 in the north-eastern town of Karakol,

collected data from 300 and 550 respondents respectively, taking information not only from the village in question but also from villages located within six of the seven Kyrgyz *oblasts*, or provinces. These previous surveys were also filled out by men and its results, save for some variations, are consistent with the more recent study (Kleinbach, Ablezova, and Aitieva 2005: 194-195).

found that 45 percent of married women "had [also] been non-consensually kidnapped" (Rickleton 2012a). Furthermore, a 2011 report on the situation of children in Kyrgyzstan estimates that the prevalence of non-consensual kidnappings could be "as high as 80 percent" in certain areas (UNICEF 2011: 44), illustrating exactly how prevalent non-consensual bride kidnappings have become in some parts of Kyrgyzstan.

Real versus Feigned Priorities Upon Independence

All the while bride kidnapping was morphing into a marker of Kyrgyz identity, so too was Kyrgyzstan – into a liberal democracy. Due to Kyrgyzstan's rapid implementation of legislative and economic reforms, it soon came to be known as Central Asia's "island of democracy… in a sea of dictatorships" (Anderson 1999: 23), the "Switzerland of the East" (Hanks 2005: 299). Askar Akaev, Kyrgyzstan's first democratically-elected President, adopted a new constitution in 1993 that made Kyrgyzstan "a sovereign, unitary, democratic republic built upon the basis of a legal, secular state" (Anderson 1999: 26). Early on, Akaev also signed and ratified key international treaties, conventions and protocols.[31] Central Asian governments are "by and large supportive" of treaty ratification and oversight, accepting it especially at points when they are considered transitional, or have experienced "a significant shift in regime type within five years of ratification" (Smith-Cannoy 2012: 54; 47). However, endorsements of UN ideals proved to be "insincere commitments" as Kyrgyzstan began a rapid decline towards authoritarianism in the mid-1990s.[32] Akaev "use[d] human rights agreements as substitution

[31] Handrahan (2000) cites the following documents: The United Nations Charter; The Universal Declaration of Human Rights; The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR); The International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR); The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW); the Supplementary Convention of the Abolition of Slavery, the Slave Trade, and Institutions and Practices Similar to Slavery (the Supplementary Convention on Slavery); and the Convention on Consent to Marriage, Minimum Age for Marriage and Registration of Marriages.

[32] For instance, the judiciary was not independent from the executive branch of the state and freedom of expression was, in fact, suppressed as three media outlets "were threatened with closure by government forces", being accused of allegedly inciting ethnic violence (Smith-Cannoy 2012: 142); likewise, because NGOs are "required by law to

devices" for "deeper domestic democratic reform" (Smith-Cannoy 2012: 139). What Akaev and his administration were trying to secure was not "a wide range of civil and political rights," but foreign aid, assistance, and investment – elements necessary for a successful economic recovery. In fact, the state's concern for its primary donors' approval – essentially USAID and the IMF – kept it from joining its neighbors in a customs union, resulting in tariff wars that remained unresolved until 2000 (Smith-Cannoy 2012: 146). Kyrgyzstan has received an estimated $145 billion (USD) in foreign aid since 1991 (Handrahan 2000: 3) but despite these progressive changes and international support, bride kidnapping has persisted in Kyrgyzstan.[33]

Kyrgyzstan's efforts to secure more aid, assistance, and investment have been hindered by its political volatility. Although Akaev ruled for more than a decade, he was forced into exile in 2005, after the Tulip Revolution.[34] Kurmanbek Bakiyev, his successor, became the interim President and was later elected to office on July 10, 2005 (Gullette 2010: 28). However, he was also forced out of power in 2010, as a result of the rampant ethnic conflict that broke out in southern Kyrgyzstan and quickly spread north, leading to mass civil unrest. Next came Roza Otunbayeva, who was appointed to take Bakiyev's place, but she did not run for reelection in the 2011 presidential elections. Instead, Almazbek Atambayev was elected as Kyrgyzstan's 4th

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register with the government" and it is the Ministry of Justice that processes their registration, an organization can be "denied" due to bureaucratic obstacles. The fact that the process can be "tedious" is itself a "deterrent" (Smith-Cannoy 2012: 144); Akaev, in fact, ruled by decree (Smith-Cannoy 2012: 141).

[33] International actors other than USAID have also aided Kyrgyzstan tremendously. in the mid to late 1990s, that the agricultural sector experienced a boost in productivity; the IMF and World Bank provided the Kyrgyz aid and assistance in the form of loans and educational programs for farmers, assisting experienced producers with technical and financial issues, and, in turn, allowing them to not only adjust to new market conditions, but also prosper within them (Hanks 2005: 338-339); in 2001, the agricultural sector constituted about 35% of the country's GDP (Hanks 2005: 334). Similarly, aid from the Canadian Centerra Gold company ("Gold Beneath the Snow" 2013) allowed for establishment of the large Kumtor gold mine along the southern edge of Lake Issyk-Kul, contributing 9% to the Kyrgyz GDP in 2001 (Hanks 2005: 341), which remains to be one of Kyrgyzstan's more productive enterprises.

[34] The Tulip Revolution refers to a series of demonstrations by different opposition groups in Kyrgyzstan, each of which employed different colors and symbols in their protests, such as yellow, pink, and lemon or daffodils and tulips (Gullette 2010: 16). The Tulip Revolution culminated in 2005 but is said to have begun on March 17, 2002, with what is known as the 'Aksy tragedy', when OMON officers (the special police force) fired at a group of protestors in the Jalalabat district, killing six (Gullette 2010: 19).

president since Akaev was first ousted in 2005. Apart from these changes that took place at the head of government, the constitution as well as the overall structure and composition of the national parliament have also sustained significant changes, downsizing from a bicameral to a unicameral system.

Consequently, we see how Kyrgyz society has remained in a permanent state of contradiction. Starting with colonial Russian rule and following through to the Soviet era, the question of what was Kyrgyz and how Kyrgyzness was allowed to be embodied has been constantly questioned and shaped through a reconciliation of forces that both suppressed and promoted ethnic elements, and further complicated them with outside influences, namely Russian and Soviet. Upon obtaining its independence from the Soviet Union, what was meant to be a break from the past was simply a continuation of previous administrations, albeit under a guise of progress. Thus, instead of living up to the expectations put forth by a discourse of progress, the Kyrgyz government has allowed for the normalization and fortification of bride kidnapping as a social institution – one that also serves an indispensable political function. Let us now examine these social and political implications.

II. The Socio-Political Role of Bride Kidnapping in Society

Having explored the context in which non-consensual bride kidnapping emerged and became prevalent, let us focus on the actors and social and political conditions that have contributed to its acceptance in Kyrgyz society. This discussion is centered on how the practice manifests itself in Kyrgyzstan post-independence, as well as within the other cultures around the world where it has been observed. Bride kidnapping is predominant in societies where it actively reinforces established customs and notions. Utilizing a comparative framework, we can better

understand the social function of the practice and its cross-cultural features, thus allowing an examination of the specific elements resulting in the recognition of bride kidnapping as a Kyrgyz tradition. The practice has proven to be malleable in the presence of changing political conditions. Furthermore, the political establishment tacitly supports bride kidnapping as a favorable element of Kyrgyz society, deemed worthy of preservation both by its people and the government.

Marriage Rites and Social Rights

Marriage is an important rite of passage, marking a person's initiation into adulthood. In Kyrgyzstan, however, bride kidnapping has become an alternative form of matrimonial union carrying out the same social function as a traditional marriage. The relationship between marriage and adulthood is common in many cultures, such as the Tzeltal of Mexico and the Yörük of Turkey, where an individual's "transition to social maturity and adult status" is validated through marriage (Bates 1974: 273, 284; Stross 1974: 330). Marriage does not simply symbolize having reached adulthood in terms of age or status; in Kyrgyzstan, it also marks the start of one's "ethnic adulthood." Therefore, a young girl who refuses to marry her kidnapper is also effectively rejecting her own Kyrgyz identity (Handrahan 2004: 222, 208). Both Kyrgyz men and women experience pressure from their parents and relatives to marry young, because being married comes with many benefits, such as "access to new material and social resources." In contrast, being full-grown and unmarried in Kyrgyz society can "attract unwanted attention and scorn."[35] In order to avoid this fate, bride kidnapping has become a "quick way to secure a wife", allowing men and women to successfully transition into adulthood, reputations unscathed. (O'Neill 2012: 148-149, 155)

[35] Long courtships can also lead to "damaging gossip" (O'Neill 2012: 155).

Furthermore, gender roles and notions of manhood and femininity are further reinforced through the practice of kidnapping. Manhood, just as adulthood, is defined "in an ethnic context" through kidnapping, which functions as a "test of manhood" (Handrahan 2004: 223-224). A man who successfully kidnaps a bride is viewed by other males as a stronger, more capable man – a "stallion" (Butts 2009). Yet, should he fail to "perform the prescribed 'manly activities'," he would instead be overcome with great shame, not having lived up to his friends', or "fraternity['s]" expectations (Handrahan 2004: 224). Thus, male honor is inherently tied to female sexuality (Werner 2009: 323). While Kyrgyz men characterize themselves as stallions, women are characterized as young foals that are to be "broke[n] and harnessed" so that they "become obedient like a good horse and… happy" (Butts 2009). Once again, "manhood is defined by and through acts of violence against, and dominance of, women" (Handrahan 2004: 210; 223). [36] Therefore, masculinity and manhood are not only defined by a Kyrgyz man's ability to secure a wife, but also by his treatment of women and by the collective approval of other men.

A young girl's sense of womanhood and femininity is likewise reinforced though kidnapping. The ritual performances of resistance simulated by young girls for spectators and future family members can offer some insight: "good" Kyrgyz girls are expected to "perform resistance" by "weep[ing], fight[ing], and try[ing] to escape;" in doing so, they simultaneously assert their honor, as a woman is not supposed to publicly express her "eagerness to marry" (O'Neill 146); otherwise, she would be deemed "desperate" (Lom 2004). Thus, women are active agents in the construction of the images by which they are perceived, crafting themselves as seemingly "obedient, loyal" (HRW 2006: 95), two highly valued qualities in a wife and daughter-in-law. These performative acts, however, make it difficult to distinguish between

[36] In Al Jazeera's Witness documentary, *Kidnapped Brides*, Ilyas, the kidnapper, and his friends manage to convince a young girl named Gulvina to accept the marriage; Ilyas's best friend Taltan then says: "Today we proved ourselves to be real Kyrgyz men, thanks be to Allah; we did many manly deeds today" (Butts 2009).

consensual and non-consensual kidnappings as women who truly do not wish to be married behave similarly but in earnest, "intentionally 'acting like… wild wom[e]n'," "screaming and… telling [the older women] [they] wan[t] to leave," repeatedly "pushing [the kerchief] away." Once a young bride gives in to the older women's pressure and accepts the marriage, she symbolically allows them to tie the white *jooluk*, or marriage scarf, around her head (Werner 2009: 318; 325). It is considered that only "real Kyrgyz women" submit. A woman's value may even be appraised simply by having been kidnapped, the "ultimate confirmation of [her]… worth" (Handrahan 2004: 208-209).[37]

Moreover, notions centered on honor and shame and the social norms that reinforce them are also regulated by the events surrounding bride kidnappings. Again, a woman's chastity is still highly prized in Kyrgyz society. When a young girl is kidnapped, it is assumed – especially if she remains in her new in-laws' home overnight – that her union with the kidnapper has been consummated (O'Neill 2012: 148). If she were to run away both she and her family would be "disgraced" (Butts 2009), and she would be labeled as "stubborn and belligerent" (Werner 2009: 323), making her an undesirable life partner and daughter-in-law. At that point, "the best she could then hope for would be to marry as a second or third wife" (Butts 2009). Consequently, parents often refuse to let their daughters return home and insist on their acceptance of the marriage, pressuring them to stay. Such is true even if a young bride was in a serious relationship with another man prior to the kidnapping. It is often the case that the man refuses to rescue his girlfriend and simply accepts that she now belongs to another.[38] In general, the many people who

[37] Similarly, as young girls age, the likelihood of being kidnapped dwindles; girls enter what is considered marrying age at 16, but just seven years later, at 25, they are deemed "too old not to be married" (Lom 2004).

[38] In Petr Lom's documentary we learn that Norkuz was allegedly dating someone else when she was kidnapped, but he never comes to her rescue (2004). Similarly, when the young girl we spoke of earlier, Gulzina, is kidnapped, her boyfriend Uluk expresses the desire to get her back, going even as far as speaking to her parents; he is considered the "exception among Kyrgyz guys." Still, in the end, he decides against the rescue. He claims that when he thought

believe that bride kidnapping is wrong, also believe a kidnapped bride should accept the marriage in order to avoid the shaming that would follow (Werner 2009: 322). It is also expected that after some time and having had a child, the bride and groom will suddenly "be in love with each other" (Butts 2009).

While bride kidnapping perpetuates patriarchal social structures in Kyrgyz society, I suggest it simultaneously sustains noxious gerontocratic hierarchies.[39] Patriarchal societies often hide behind a "cultural smokescreen" (Handrahan 2004: 211), attributing to culture the set of institutional practices that are harmful to women. From our previous analysis of manhood and masculinity, we saw how kidnapping represents male power "leveraged through physical force, violence, a fraternity of the kidnapper's closest male friends and relatives and vodka." It acts as a "tool of masculine hegemony" used to institutionalize a particular "ethnic-cultural order" (Handrahan: 2004: 223-224, 211). Thus, as a response to these structures, women bargain with patriarchy, as Kandiyoti argues when she claims that under a given set of context-based constraints, women will strategize to gain equal footing with men (1988: 275). In situations where young brides enter their husbands' households, always occupying the lowest position, Kyrgyz women prioritize having male offspring – "the only way to establish themselves in the patriliny." These women go on to suppress any opportunities their sons may have at romantic love to "keep the conjugal bond secondary" to their primary duties as sons. In essence, older Kyrgyz women overcome the deprivation and hardship they face as young brides by submitting their own daughter-in-laws to the same treatment. Therefore, by replicating this cycle, young

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of Gulzina's wedding ceremony, he "imagined her in the arms of someone else and the bed full of her virginal blood;" these thoughts caused "[his] love for her die" (Butts 2009).

[39] Gerontocracy refers to "a state, society, or group governed by old people." In the Kyrgyz case, older women are granted access to the higher echelons of the social hierarchy by oppressing younger women. Rather than choosing matriarchy for this discussion, which refers to a social system or government ruled by women, gerontocracy seems the more accurate term as it emphasizes age and not gender. Kyrgyz women gain leverage in Kyrgyz society as they age. However, Kyrgyz society remains patriarchal throughout.

brides anticipate the inheritance of authority and thoroughly internalize this form of patriarchy (Kandiyoti 1988: 279). This is best illustrated in the way kidnappers' mothers approach kidnapped brides; they always reassure young brides by their own past experiences. The groom's mother is especially welcoming of the new daughter-in-law as the expectation is that she will "help with household chores" (Werner 2009:317).[40] However, older women operating within patriarchal constraints are unaware of how their acceptance of their prescribed roles only furthers male "control over female mobility and sexuality," and reinforces patriarchal social structures that hinder women from defining their future (Werner 2009: 351).

What is more, the practice also strengthens Kyrgyz's self-identification as Muslims. In fact, Kyrgyzstan has been experiencing an Islamic revival, supported by "increased funds, presence and conversion activity supported by the Turk[ey] and [Saudi Arabia] as they attempt to bring Central Asia under their influence" (Handrahan 2004: 212). Despite this surge in interest and outside influence, the Kyrgyz remain only nominally Muslim.[41] In fact, it is a common practice for the kidnapper and his accomplices to drink alcohol both before the kidnapping and ceremoniously during the wedding reception. Soviet influence caused vodka to practically overtake the national drink made of fermented milk (Iğmen 2012: 50). However, the possession of alcohol in Islam, let alone its consumption, is considered *haram*, or sin. Thus, calling on a *moldo*[42] to perform the nikaah marriage ceremony represents the only way in which Muslim identity is reinforced through bride kidnapping. The nikaah legitimizes a marriage in the eyes of

[40] Prior to Ilyas's kidnap of Gulzina, Cholopon, his mother, declares that she is "not prepared to wait anymore for [her] son… to get married. [She] ha[s] all [that] housework and looking after animals to do. [She's] old and ill and… want[s] this new bride to do it all" (Butts 2009); similarly, Jumankul's mother claims that she "need[s] a bride to tend sheep" (Lom 2004).Thus, when Gulzina accepts her forced marriage to Ilyas, Cholopon welcomes her into the family by tying the wedding scarf over her head as she says, "May children be in front of you and animals behind. Congratulations!" (Butts 2009)

[41] For example, when Ilyas and his friends kidnapped Gulzina, they "stole her while [she and her family] were reading prayers for her father's funeral" (Butts 2009), showing no regard for the observation of Islamic funeral rites.

[42] *Moldo* is the Kyrgyz word for *mullah*, or Muslim cleric.

the bride and groom's kin and kith. However, in cases of bride kidnapping, a nikaah takes precedence over the official registration of the marriage with the state, leaving young brides without rights over property and their own children if their husbands were to leave them or file for divorce (Aitmatova 2009: 15-16). The great controversy around the consecration of kidnapped marriages by moldos is due to the fact that Islam prohibits non-consensual unions. Moreover, it has been speculated that moldos often legitimize men's marriages to second and third wives, contributing to the growing but covert problem of polygamy in Kyrgyzstan. In fact, the Kyrgyz Parliament once debated for two consecutive days about the legalization of polygamy on the basis that it "is a Muslim tradition the Russians prohibited" and that "if Kyrgyz men wanted to be 'real' [men] then they must reinstate it" (Handrahan 2004: 212).[43]

In practical terms, and in addition to the various social structures that bride kidnapping fortifies, the practice also serves many mitigating functions and manifests itself as an adaptation to lived realities mediated by a harsh economic atmosphere that further legitimizes its propagation. For instance, the claim that bride kidnappings in China were "a 'primitive' remnant of [its] ancient past" has been challenged by the idea that it was "a socially acceptable response to the irrationalities of the dowry/bride-price system" (McLaren 2011: 953).[44] The same is true among the poorer, rural Kyrgyz; although Kleinbach's study found that only 3 percent of men admitted to "being unable to pay the kalym" as a reason for kidnapping (Kleinbach 2005: 197), the precarious national economic situation and the fact that a vast number of Kyrgyz people are

[43] Thus, a recent bill that would have made moldos accountable for affirming non-consensual unions was unsurprisingly shot down by Parliament.

[44] It is widely held in the Chinese Pudong-Nanhui region that if "in both arranged and abducted marriages, the partners do not know each other before marriage" and certain "rules" are followed, then the practice can be ascribed "general 'acceptability'… amongst the poor" (McLaren 2011: 962; 978-979).

currently living in complete penury indicates otherwise.[45] In contrast, many other scholars cite this as one of the greatest determinants in kidnappings (Aitmatova 2009: 3; Werner 2009: 326), as the bride price may cost the groom's family anywhere from $1,000 to $5,000 USD, with weddings costing as much as $3,000 USD (Bauer, Green, Keuhnast 1997: 24).

In another instance, marriages among the Yörük that are a product of kidnappings "contribute to the survival potential" of the population in the context of "a nomadic pastoral system of land use." In other words, kidnapping "disperse[s] affinal relationships and patterns of social alignment," allowing for familial relations to go beyond the descent group (Bates 1974: 282-283; 270; 273). Parallel to the Yörük, the Kyrgyz of the past had strong interpersonal ties extending beyond the family and into the immediate community. However, post-Soviet Kyrgyz society, having undergone the various socio-economic transformations brought on by Russo-Soviet rule discussed earlier, has witnessed an effective erosion of the social safety net that was once so instrumental for survival. Although not the most favorable alternative, parents often acquiesce to the kidnapping of their daughter in order to lessen their own economic burden.[46] During the Soviet era, the Kyrgyz believed that 100 friends were worth more than 100 rubles; this mentality has persisted until today. Relations between the bride and groom's families may not be as they were traditionally, but their active role in relieving the economic pressure afflicting a young bride's family is perceived nonetheless as a kindness.

Similarly, Stross found that bride kidnapping within the Tzeltal community of Tenejapa in the central highlands of Chiapas in Mexico allowed for men otherwise deemed undesirable to marry. Given that marriage is an important cultural rite of passage, kidnapping – for these men –

[45] This low figure could also be attributed to Kyrgyz men's refusal to admit to living with financial hardships; it seems that such behavior would go against the male code, as it could be interpreted as a sign of weakness.
[46] For instance, Zoya, a widowed mother, accepted her daughter's kidnapping, knowing that because she now "belong[ed]" to her husband's family, it is they who must "pay for her education and look after all her needs" (Skoch 2010), relieving the extraneous financial responsibility.

is seen as a "culturally acceptable alternativ[e]" (Stross 1974: 340-341). The same can be observed in Kyrgyzstan. Norkuz's kidnapper, shown in Petr Lom's documentary, tells of how he "went to several girls, but had no luck. One seemed to agree, the other refused." "Nobody wanted me," he continued and ended resolutely by saying, "This one will stay" (2004). Likewise, many of the young women who divulged their stories to Human Rights Watch claimed to have been kidnapped by undesirable or unwanted men, a term used to encompass men who are aesthetically displeasing, mentally ill, or are "socially tainted" – having criminal records and the like (2006: 94). However, one might say these men's undesirability is two-fold; while a woman might deem a man unattractive for any one of the aforementioned reasons, a man may internalize his undesirability, as did Norkuz's husband. Kidnapping then becomes a way to avoid rejection. Men who kidnap also admit to feeling rising anxiety before they go to snatch the bride-to-be.[47] To support this theory of insecurity, Kleinbach, Ablezova, and Aitieva's study revealed that 29 percent of men kidnapped their wives because they were afraid the girl they had in mind "might refuse [a] marriage proposal" (2005: 196). A representative from the Kyrgyz NGO Diamond also claimed that many men are "unwilling to risk rejection from a woman whom [they] [fear] may be 'too good for [them]'" (HRW 2006: 96). Other scholars have speculated that this widespread fear of rejection is exacerbated by "a lack of [a] dating culture" (Kleinbach, Ablezova, and Aitieva 2005: 197), where shame also plays a definitive role.[48]

[47] For instance, when Kubanti and his friends were on their way to his future bride's home, he and his friends admitted to feeling "their hearts pounding," repeatedly saying how "nervous" they all felt (VICE 2011). Ilyas similarly admitted to feeling "worried" beforehand, "his heart… thumping with pain" (Butts 2009).

[48] By dating culture, I refer to the Western notion of courtship to denote how men and women get to know one another and decide whether or not they are a good match: being friends before dating, dating for an extended period of time, and getting to know each other's parents are just a few examples. As aforementioned, long courtships are frowned upon in Kyrgyz culture and arranged marriage was the norm in the past, whereby a man and a woman would be married without knowing each other or, in some cases, even met. Thus, Kyrgyz men might find it easier to kidnap a bride rather than engage in an extended courtship. Kleinbach and Salimjanova also reference men's unwillingness to spend money on courtship, when that money could be spent on a marriage (2007: 218).

Finally, the idea that bride kidnapping is a purely organic Kyrgyz tradition has promoted its normalization. Time and time again, when the subject of bride kidnapping is brought up in conversation with Kyrgyz people, there is an overwhelming consensus that bride kidnapping is "[their] tradition." Mothers admit to allowing their unwilling daughters to be kidnapped if only to preserve this element which seems so crucial in the formation of a Kyrgyz person (Lom 2004). Additionally, bride kidnapping allows the Kyrgyz to seemingly honor the traditions of their ancestors. Thirty-four percent of the men surveyed in Kleinbach, Ablezova, and Aitieva's 2005 study overwhelmingly cited bride kidnapping as a "good traditional way to get a bride" (196-197). Most importantly, the practice is itself is seen as sustaining traditional elements of Kyrgyz society and identity, as we have seen above. However, the value that bride kidnapping holds in Kyrgyz society extends into the political realm and is, thus, reinforced at a higher level.

The Politics of Bride Kidnapping

Although bride kidnapping is not openly endorsed by the state, there is an observed indifference toward the enforcement of anti-bride kidnapping legislation, as Human Rights Watch has found (2005). Such a deliberate neglect for enforcement points to the idea that the Kyrgyz government may, in fact, tacitly approve of the practice. This paper suggests three reasons why that may be the case. First, bride kidnapping is widely considered as a Kyrgyz tradition, one that acts as a unifying force instilling a sense of collective Kyrgyzness that conveniently builds upon the Kyrgyz-centered nationalist discourse, history, and – by extension – the ruling government. From the moment he assumed presidency, Askar Akaev set out to transform the ethno-nationalist discourse and history by way of the Kyrgyz flag, first, and, later, through full-fledged government-sponsored celebrations of Kyrgyzness. Second, the promotion of a distinct Kyrgyz history and identity, of which bride kidnapping was to become an integral

part, supported the government's efforts to maintain social order through the promotion of a noble, Kyrgyz morality that favored stability. However, the results of these policies have been neither perfect nor complete and, in fact, the new discourse introduced a purely Kyrgyz identity and history that very much paralleled the implementation of previous Russo-Soviet policies. Additionally, the self-representation of the state as purely Kyrgyz continues to contribute to rising ethnic tensions, as the country has become hostile to its ethnic minorities. Third, the reinforcement of patriarchal structures at home as a result of bride kidnapping is further reproduced within the state bureaucracy, which is dominated by men. In fact, male government officials actively use bride kidnapping to detract negative attention away from issues more pertinent to them, such as the issue of polygamy, while reinforcing their decision-making power at the state level.

Engendering a New Ethno-nationalism

The process of reclaiming Kyrgyzness predates Kyrgyzstan's independence, arising as a reaction to the Soviet's increasingly forceful efforts to achieve full Russification within the countries of the Soviet Union, as discussed earlier. However, a more forceful policy aimed at restoring Kyrgyzness was established under Akaev's administration. Akaev's regime, apart from having a focus on political and economic reform, also prioritized the de-Russification of the Kyrgyz and the active construction and indoctrination of an ethno-national Kyrgyz identity and history, as a way to legitimize the newly founded Kyrgyz state. In order to accomplish this goal, Akaev manipulated the nation's vexillology by introducing nomadic symbols into the Kyrgyz flag as well as in celebrations disseminating the state's ethno-nationalist discourse.

The design of the current flag illustrates the government's effort to reclaim Kyrgyzness and promote national unity, as it represents a fusion of the ethnic (utilizing nomadic Kyrgyz

symbols) and the national (by incorporating these symbols as icons of the nation). The flag is predominantly red with a yellow sun in the center with forty rays, each representing the original Kyrgyz tribes. The flaming sun and the red are said to be "symbols of Manas" (Namatbaeva 2012).[49] In the sun's center is a stylized representation of the *tyundyuk*, or the latticed smoke hole found in the roof of the archetypal nomadic Kyrgyz yurt, as seen in Figure 2 below.[50] This state-sponsored symbolism, which incorporates the endorsed qualities of ethnic Kyrgyzness, laid the foundation for the ethno-nationalist discourse that would later be heavily promoted.

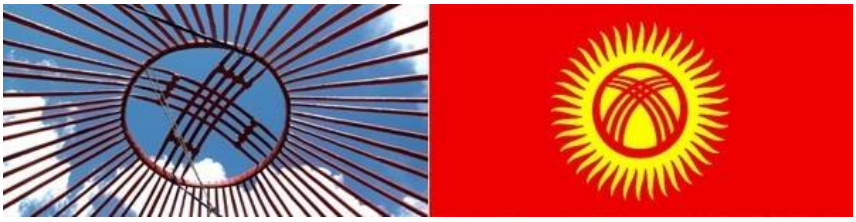

Figure 2. *Tyundyuk* of a typical Kyrgyz yurt (left); current Kyrgyz flag (right).
Image source: http://www.ideanomads.com/events-ideas/2009-jun-23-kyrgyz-yurts/

Muratbek Imanaliev, named "one of the 20 most influential politicians" in Kyrgyzstan in 2003 (Abazov 2004:140) once said, "'Kyrgyz' is not an ethnonym; 'Kyrgyz' is an idea."[51] It is exactly this notion that Akaev embraces during his extended term. Akaev constructed a national genealogy in order to foster ethno-national unity during the tough transition period following the collapse of the Soviet Union (Gullette 2010: 5; 22). Before Akaev came to power, Kyrgyz history had been essentially "written by outsiders" or "within a socialist ideology" (Gullette 2010: 11). Before then, history was passed down and disseminated orally, as in the case of the

[49] Manas is the protagonist in an epic poem by the same name which has come to embody Kyrgyzness.
[50] The *tyunduk* is said to represent "the fatherland and the universe in general" (Minahan 1998: 140; Abazov 2004: 127). The flag was adopted by the Kyrgyz Parliament, the Jogorku Kenesh, on March 3, 1992, very early on in Akaev's administration (Id: ib).
[51] Imanaliev was heavily involved in the government in various capacities since the Soviet era in the 1980s up until 2002, when he lost his position as minister of foreign affairs due to the "fall of the cabinet". He was involved in various negotiations with foreign powers including the United States, the IMF, the World Bank, and China (Abazov 2004: 139-140).

epic poem *Manas* (Kleinbach and Salimjanova 2007: 224). Thus, Akaev seized the opportunity to advance the version of Kyrgyz history which best supported his nationalist efforts. Through the government-sponsored celebration of the 1,000th anniversary of *Manas* in 1995, the celebration of 2,200 years of Kyrgyz Statehood in 2003, and the 3,000th anniversary of the city of Osh in 2000, Akaev fostered Kyrgyz ethno-national unity while promoting his own historical discourse in order to effectively maintain social control.

The first event, celebrating the epic poem *Manas*, was endorsed by the United Nations in 1994. The UN claimed that Manas represented:

> "…a vital link in sustaining and unifying the peoples of the Central Asian region throughout their long history… [as] [it] is not only the source of Kyrgyz language and literature but also the foundation of the cultural, moral, historical, social and religious traditions of the Kyrgyz people" (Gullette 2010: 137;153).

As Kleinbach states, "*Manas* is Kyrgyz; Kyrgyz is *Manas*" (VICE 2011). While *Manas* was accepted as part of Kyrgyz identity, due to its depiction of Kyrgyz origins, history, and society, it also problematically encouraged the claiming of identity through warfare.[52] Despite a "small revival" in the 1950s, it was not until Chinghiz Aitmatov celebrated the epic's virtues in the 1980s that *Manas* was extolled as a work that promoted both ethnic Kyrgyzness and nationalism. As a result, a statue of Manas was erected in Bishkek in 1985. Therefore, the 1995 celebration follows the growing need to reclaim Kyrgyzness accomplished through the glorification of Manas. Akaev furthered these efforts by commemorating a "story of ethnogenesis," complementing it with an official discourse on Kyrgyz history assembled in his own academic work (Gullette 2010: 138-139). According to Akaev, "the Kyrgyz national consciousness… had

[52] Although the Soviets initially considered using the *Manas* epic to "further development of Soviet patriotism, friendship between the nations of the USSR in the spirit of Stalin, as well as the development of Kyrgyz culture" in the 1940s, they ultimately found it "too inflammatory" and suspended all celebrations.

been developing for centuries" (2003: 12); anachronistically, he posits that the Kyrgyz nation existed even before the concept of a 'nation' was conceived.

Furthermore, the celebration of the Manas epic was aimed at imbuing a sense of morality, critical to maintaining social order. This morality is embedded in the seven precepts of Manas as enumerated by Akaev (Gullette 2010: 139). Akaev pushed to associate these precepts to spirituality, or *dukhovnyi*, which he claimed connected the Kyrgyz of today with the "high moral principles and ethical standards" upheld by their ancestors in the past, which have now become "the flesh and blood of the Kyrgyz". Heroism and nobleness, he continues, were "features of the Kyrgyz national character born out of the difficult conditions of [their] history" (Gullette 2010: 140). Thus, the notion of spirituality, underlined by these moral implications, allowed Akaev to create a "new version of moral values" based on a version of the past recounted through *Manas*. Moreover, by championing spirituality, Akaev was able to develop a "secular moral system," essentially distinguishing the Kyrgyz from Islam. This was particularly important because Akaev championed ethnic Kyrgyzness while rejecting the aspects associated with traditions he considered 'backward,' such as Islam. This manner of reinforcing ethnic identity with the aim of producing a more favorable identity is reminiscent of the policies of the Russian tsars and Soviets rulers of the past. Just as the Soviets had done, Akaev symbolically deployed the traditional Kyrgyz yurt. When the Soviets opened the first Houses of Culture in Kyrgyzstan, they referred to them as Red Yurts (Iğmen 2012: 3). Similarly, Akaev had a three-story yurt erected for the *Manas* celebrations, calling it Manas *Ordo*, or Manas's Palace (Gullette 2010: 137). As we have seen previously, however, Soviet policies did not always produce the intended results.

Through the second celebration, which commemorated the alleged 2,200 years of Kyrgyz statehood, Akaev defined 'statehood' as "the interaction between the people and the state," a

relationship brought on "by historical figures to maintain unity among the Kyrgyz people and attain independence" (Gullette 2010: 156). Thus, by promoting the "ancient origins of the state" and the "formation of… the 'Kyrgyz person'," Akaev made it so that the state "belong[ed] to all people." Therefore, the "nation," which had previously maintained a distinct ethnic identity, became synonymous with the state. Akaev's slogan, "Kyrgyzstan is our common home," set out to engender this unification. Consequently, because the state belongs to all, everyone also has a responsibility to it (Gullette 2010: 158-159). To Akaev's demise, however, his policies of unification did not ring true all throughout Kyrgyzstan. The flag's symbolism was as contested as the official discourse effectively alienated other ethnic groups, namely the Uzbeks, and led to various uprisings.[53]

The third event we will examine, which took place in 2000, celebrated the 3,000th anniversary of the city of Osh. This event brought to the fore rising ethnic tensions in Kyrgyzstan, particularly in the historically neglected south. Ethnic tensions between the Kyrgyz and the Uzbeks had already culminated in rampant violence in 1990 over land rights. Thus, in planning for the event, Akaev not only sought to unveil a new monument of famous individuals from the area but also his plan for reelection, hoping to bring the Uzbeks into the fold, who often looked beyond Kyrgyzstan's borders for political legitimacy. Akaev had many established notions working against him: for one, power and wealth was concentrated in the north and, secondly, no Uzbeks formed part of Parliament or any other decision-making body. Of the statues unveiled only one man, Salizhan Sharipov, was remotely Uzbek; he had been born in

[53] The Uzbeks constitute the second-largest group in Kyrgyzstan, making up about 14 percent of the population (Hanks 2005: 310). Regarding the flag, Mar Baygiev, a Kyrgyz playwright, recently spoke out against the symbols associated with Manas, claiming they were "inappropriate" for Kyrgyzstan, a nation made up of many different ethnic groups and that while Manas carried a red flag for personal use, it was not a "national one." Others have claimed that the red color of the flag is symbolic of communism[53] or of the blood shed throughout the nation's history[53] (Namatbaeva 2012). Such discussions have been set aside for the time being, but they nonetheless echo the ineffectuality of Akaev's unification policies.

Kyrgyzstan but was of Uzbek origin (Gullette 2010: 167). In an attempt to champion Kyrgyzstan as their "common home," Akaev instead delineated a "distinctly Kyrgyz space" (Gullette 2010: 169). It was not surprising, therefore, to see ethnic tensions erupt into bloody riots in 2010.

Consider the following statements, as they reveal how the national discourse has been inculcated in the minds of the Kyrgyz people. As told in a recent documentary, while Ilyas and his friends rode through the pastures near their rural homes they state matter-of-factly: "We are descended from great ancestors. We must never forget our traditions. We must prolong them" (Butts 2009). The need to live up to the legacy of their ancestors is further expressed in the way they describe what they feel is their duty to kidnap: "Since ancient times our ancestors stole girls. We will also steal girls" (Butts 2009). Similarly, Kyrgyz women also bear the burden of conforming to society's expectations in an effort to preserve what is viewed as purely Kyrgyz. Upon conceding to a kidnap, internalizing the Kyrgyz proverb "let the stone lie where it has fallen" (Gullette 2010: 13-14), Kyrgyz women are recognized as true bearers of womanhood within their community. More importantly, they feel they are actively partaking in "building their nation"[54] (Handrahan 2004: 208-209). Although bride kidnapping has become a vehicle through which both Kyrgyz men and women feel they can honor their ancestors and participate in the nation-building process, there is no mention of bride kidnapping in *Manas* and in the other literary works where it has been featured, it "always involved the concept of consent" (Kleinbach 2007: 224; 221). Therefore, we bear witness to the ways in which the Kyrgyz have employed the ethno-national discourse imposed by their government and re-interpreted it in ways that fit their worldview.

[54] Such notions come from the Kyrgyz's Soviet legacy; during the Soviet period the "Mat'Geroina" award was given to mothers who had more than five children. These mothers were said to be "rebuilding the country" following the Second World War (Bauer, Green, Keuhnast 50).

Under Akaev's rule we have seen how the commemoration of a new flag embedded with symbols of nomadism and the celebration of various events centered on an ethno-nationalist discourse were used to unite the Kyrgyz people and maintain social order. Bride kidnapping, as it is considered a Kyrgyz tradition, indirectly helped Akaev solidify his efforts with mixed results among the Kyrgyz and the other ethnic minorities in Kyrgyzstan, undermining Akaev's secondary goal. Nonetheless, it is evident that bride kidnapping has been instrumental in the internalization of the notions of Kyrgyzness endorsed by the state, as it reinforces the purported image of ethnic identity.

Promoting a Patriarchal State

Returning to our earlier discussion, bride kidnapping reinforces traditional structures that are viewed favorably within Kyrgyz society, among them patriarchy. The proliferation of patriarchy, as alluded to earlier, takes place within the private sphere although bride kidnapping also reinforces existing patriarchal structures at the state level. Wendy Brown's theory concerning masculinism in the state is particularly pertinent to our discussion. According to Brown, "the masculinism of the state refers to those features of the state that signify, enact, sustain, and represent masculine power as a form of dominance" which is then expressed as "the power to describe and run the world *and* the power of access to women" (1995: 167). Kyrgyz men wield the power to dominate Kyrgyz women in as much as they constitute the majority at all levels of government and everyday life. Within the home, it is the eldest male who makes all household decisions; at the local level, the aksakals are considered the authority on the "traditional ways of living." Aksakals are predominantly male, and women have only been noted as being part of the council "in a handful of cases" (Iğmen 2012: 44). At the state level, it is yet again the men who rule in abundance. According to data from the Inter-Parliamentary Union

(2013), women only occupy 28 out of 120 seats in the National Parliament. The percentage of women in the Kyrgyz Parliament is only as 'high' as it is because of a set of reforms initiated in time for the 2007 elections. According to the new electoral code, the election was to be held by party lists; within each list, "no more than 70 percent of the candidates could be of one gender," 15 percent had to be under the age of 35, at minimum, and at least 15 percent of candidates had to identify with an ethnic group other than Kyrgyz. As a result, 23 women secured positions in Parliament, going on to occupy high posts in government.[55] However, there was no female representation among governors or heads of local government (U.S. Department of State 2008). Thus, because men outnumber women in posts that would otherwise allow women to exert their influence in decision-making processes, it is men who possess the power to "describe and run the world" as Brown denotes and, by extension, control the outcomes of key decisions regarding women's issues, such as bride kidnapping.

This power inherently allows male government officials to dominate women and have "access" to them, as Brown claims. Kyrgyz members of Parliament (MPs) refuse to give non-consensual bride kidnapping its due importance. While Article 165 of the Kyrgyz Criminal Code allows for someone guilty of livestock theft to serve up to 11 years in prison, as stipulated under Article 155 of that same code, someone convicted for bride kidnapping can only serve up to three years (Kasymova 2012). MP Kozhobek Ryspaev joked about the difference between the two crimes, saying, "Well, livestock is eaten, and women are not." Ryspaev, "something of a hate figure for anti-bride kidnapping campaigners," as Nogoibaeva suggests, was quoted later saying: "Introducing harsher penalties for bride kidnapping may result in imprisoning all of the

[55] The following are some of the high-level posts held by women in parliament as a result of the 2007 parliamentary elections: minister of finance, minister of education and science, minister of labor and social development, chief justice of the Constitutional Court, the chair of the State Committee on Migration and Employment Issues, and chair of the CEC (U.S. Department of State 2008).

men in Kyrgyzstan." Ryspaev's remarks did meet some opposition from fellow MPs Irina Karamushkina, Dastan Bekeshev, and Shirin Aitmatova. Karamushkina claimed that "bride kidnapping is… an abduction… [and] tradition can only become a tradition when both parties agree to it;" Bakeshev insisted that "tougher punishment is crucial;" Aitmatova expressed her support of Bakeshev's statement, declaring "I think it's right." Thus, on October 18, 2012, Parliament passed a bill making bride kidnapping "punishable by seven years in jail" (Nogoibaeva 2012).[56] Although this presented an improvement on the previous law, it still suggests that bride kidnapping is less serious of a crime than stealing livestock or kidnapping for other purposes; Article 123 of the Kyrgyz Criminal Code deems abduction punishable by 5 to 10 years imprisonment. Vice Speaker Asiya Sasykbaeva suggested for bride kidnappers to be subject to the same penalties (Kasymova 2012). Nonetheless, as expressed by blogger Ulugbek Babakulov, there exists a widely held belief that "sober-minded parliamentarians are a minority" in the Kyrgyz Parliament, a notion that was supported by Sasykbaeva's fellow MPs reactions to her suggestion (Nogoibaeva 2012).[57] Sasykbaeva's suggestion was ridiculed by "a number of male MPs" who claimed "the punishment is too tough;" MP Kurmanbek Dyikanbaev was quoted saying, "I propose fines or administrative punishments, otherwise prisons will not have enough space for the kidnappers" (Kasymova 2012). Although the male MPs claim to support the fining of perpetrators, I remind you of the fact that legislation that "would have authorized fines for Islamic clerics who bless marriages that are not already registered with the state" was shot down

[56] An article written for Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty by Antoine Blua and Gulaiym Ashakeeva presents a different outcome. It claims the new bill increased the maximum sentence for someone who kidnaps a girl under 17 years of age to 11 years in prison, while those who kidnap women over 17 are to face 5 years in prison (2012).
[57] Just one week later, Shirin Aitmatova's parliamentary assistant kidnapped a TV journalist he had dated in the past (Nogoibaeva 2012); a month later, another mock kidnapping of a prominent TV journalist, carried out by tabloid journalists "as a 'practical joke' for their newspaper" caused an uproar, as they "forced her to undress partially, threatening to rape and kill her". The journalist and her husband have pressed charges against the tabloid journalists (Muratbekov 2012).

in early 2012 (Rickleton 2012a). Herein, it is evident that male government officials strategically approve or reject legislation that serves their interests, or allows them to have access to women.

A MP claimed that "the bill lost support because a key provision could [have] also be[en] used to crack down on the ostensibly illegal, yet quietly tolerated practice of polygamy" (Rickleton 2012a). Although the Kyrgyz Civil Code forbids men from having multiple wives and is punishable by up to two years in prison, it "is believed to be common among men who can afford to have more than one wife." Thus, because second or third marriages cannot be legally registered by the state, they, too, can be legitimized by a Muslim cleric through the nikaah ceremony, as are the marriages that result from non-consensual bride kidnappings. Most of the men in the Parliament are "intent on protecting polygamy," claims one female MP; as noted earlier, the practice was nearly legalized in the mid-1990s. Even former President Kurmanbek Bakiyev and former Prime Minister Felix Kulov are rumored to have more than one wife. With respect to the nikaah bill, which would have censured Muslim clerics, the results were quite interesting. Out of the 120 MPs, only 73 cast their vote. Among the 47 MPs not present for the session, 41 were male. 17 out of the 43 that voted in favor of the bill were women, yet three women also formed part of the 30 that voted against the bill. MP Sasykbayeva maintains that "the political will to curtail bride kidnapping 'exists' in Bishkek" (Rickleton 2012a).

All things considered, it is evident that the support of bride kidnapping follows and reinforces the domination of men in the state. By occupying the majority of positions of power in the Kyrgyz government, Kyrgyz men are able to exert their influence over decision-making processes that could have serious implications. In rejecting legislation that would criminalize Muslim clerics' sanctioning of non-consensual marriages, male MPs are not only actively opposing the eradication of bride kidnapping, but ensuring the continuation of another illegal and

questionable marriage practice: polygamy. In this way, men guarantee their dominance in Kyrgyz society at large. Therefore, bride kidnapping is utilized as a political tool, one that not only helps propagate state-level patriarchy but advances men's private interests.

Having reached this point, we have the necessary context to understand how and why non-consensual bride kidnapping has emerged and proliferated in Kyrgyzstan. We have seen how marriage practices have changed over generations: despite Soviet repression and outlawing of arranged marriages, the Kyrgyz continued to marry in the traditional way. Late in the 20th century, a simpler marriage carried out through the civil registry slowly became the preferred marriage union. However, as marriage costs increased, other forms of marriage became more prevalent, namely bride kidnapping. The practice became more prevalent, I suggest, as the Kyrgyz searched for what was ethnically Kyrgyz, notwithstanding the muddled category itself. Bride kidnapping became the favorable alternative in an attempt to reconcile economic realities and the need to reclaim ethnic Kyrgyzness.

The normalization of bride kidnapping in Kyrgyz society – by way of its social, political, and economic context – helped cement its cultural value, namely in perceptions of adulthood, manhood, femininity, honor and shame, power hierarchies based on patriarchy and gerontocracy, and an existent, yet quite nominal, Muslim identity. Politically, as I have suggested, the practice dialectically supports while reinforcing a nationalist rhetoric aimed at fostering ethnic unity and stability, albeit imperfectly and at the hefty cost of women's sense of freedom. Furthermore, bride kidnapping allows men to maintain their position of power and have access to women, not only in local communities but also at the state level, promoting patriarchy at different scales.

The complex historical background and socio-political conditions in Kyrgyzstan makes it difficult to combat bride kidnapping. In what follows, however, this paper offers a new

understanding of non-consensual bride kidnapping that forcefully considers its exploitative nature by positing the practice as a form of human trafficking. Labeling the practice as such can potentially deconstruct the notion that bride kidnapping is an immutable cultural artifact. In this way, I aim to contribute analytically and conceptually to global human rights discourses by, nonetheless, carefully detailing the empirical context in which bride kidnapping emerges in Kyrgyzstan.

III. Non-consensual Bride Kidnapping as Human Trafficking

The way in which the term 'human trafficking' is often applied to exploitative practices is evinced by the two topics in the literature that are more commonly explored: sex trafficking and prostitution (Doezema 2010; Kara 2008; Zheng 2010; Kristof and WuDunn 2010). Although the term was originally limited to these two issues, it has come to encompass various other exploitative practices, extending to the exploitation of labor, the forced recruitment of children in armed conflicts, illegal adoptions, and the purchase and sale of human organs (Scarpa 2008). That being said, this paper aims to extend the definition of human trafficking to include non-consensual bride kidnapping by using a human trafficking framework. Such framework can prove to be instrumental for campaigns and social mobilization aimed at the practice's eradication. By contextualizing the practice as such, women's rights advocates could argue beyond the simple violation of international human rights and domestic law, and more clearly illustrate the coercive and illicit nature of the practice.

Defining Human Trafficking

The following is the working definition for human trafficking, as established by the *United Nations Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children*, henceforth referred to as simply the Trafficking Protocol:

> *(a)* "Trafficking in persons" shall mean the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of persons, by means of the threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, of abduction, of fraud, of deception, of the abuse of power or of a position of vulnerability or of the giving or receiving of payments or benefits to achieve the consent of a person having control over another person, for the purpose of exploitation. Exploitation shall include, at a minimum, the exploitation of the prostitution of others or other forms of sexual exploitation, forced labour or services, slavery or practices similar to slavery, servitude or the removal of organs;
> *(b)* The consent of a victim of trafficking in persons to the intended exploitation set forth in subparagraph *(a)* of this article shall be irrelevant where any of the means set forth in subparagraph *(a)* have been used;
> *(c)* The recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of a child for the purpose of exploitation shall be considered "trafficking in persons" even if this does not involve any of the means set forth in subparagraph *(a)* of this article;
> *(d)* "Child" shall mean any person under eighteen years of age.
>
> (UN General Assembly 2000: 42-43)

Although the Trafficking Protocol put forth an internationally recognized working definition for human trafficking in 2000, the ways in which the term has been conceptualized, and thus defined, has not always been static; it has, as Vidyamali Samarasinghe states, "evolved over time to become more precise, comprehensive and nuanced." Such dynamism is crucial to the usefulness of the term, as the same author acknowledges, affirming "the narrow portrayal of trafficking as necessarily involving forced recruitment for the purposes of forced prostitution belies the complexity of the current trafficking problem," as it often alienates victims "whose experiences diverge from more traditionally recognized forms of trafficking" (2008: 21). Therefore, because the definition has been continually challenged in light of new, emerging forms of exploitation, I hope to once again complicate this discussion. Former UN Special

Rapporteur on Violence Against Women, Radhika Coomaraswamy, shares Samarasinghe's sentiments on the definition's limitations. She defines human trafficking as follows:

> Trafficking in persons means the recruitment, transportation, purchase, sale, transfer, harbouring or receipt of persons:
> (i) by threat or use of violence, abduction, force, fraud, deception or coercion (including the abuse of authority), or debt bondage, for the purpose of:
> (ii) placing or holding such person, whether for pay or not, in forced labour or slavery-like practices, in a community other than the one in which such person lived at the time of the original act described in (i).

Coomaraswamy expands the Trafficking Protocol's definition, not only implicating individual traffickers but "all parties involved." Concurrently, her definition dissociates the term from strict notions which consider that an act of trafficking can only take place when the perpetrator and his victim cross one nation's border and enter a neighboring nation's territory. In other words, while Coomaraswamy recognizes that cross-border movement is "often an aspect of trafficking," she demonstrates that it is not "a necessary prerequisite" (2000: 9). This detail is particularly relevant to the discussion of non-consensual bride kidnappings as they are normally limited to the territory within a nation's borders: kidnappers abduct young women and take them to a village that although is not the victim's own, is usually just a drive away. Thus, when discussing non-consensual bride kidnapping as well as other forms of trafficking it is imperative to recognize that human trafficking fundamentally "incorporate[s] all activities, which are non-consensual based on movement of persons" (Samarasinghe 2008: 21). Therefore, having established the theoretical framework through which we can adequately consider the elements that constitute non-consensual bride kidnapping in the context of human trafficking, an examination of the terms set forth by both the Trafficking Protocol and Radhika Coomaraswamy's definition alongside testimonial and observed evidence of the exploitative elements of the practice is necessary. In highlighting these similarities, and demonstrating how aspects of non-consensual

bride kidnapping coincide with the conditions necessary to define an act as human trafficking, the practice can then be labeled as such internationally, connecting relevant global actors to Kyrgyz women's NGOs and other organizations. This would allow them to gain more leverage against the socio-political bastion surrounding the practice within Kyrgyzstan.

A redefinition by the authorities on human trafficking is important because the ambiguities of the current definition allow for cases of internal or domestic trafficking to be ignored. It also prevents exploitative arrangements resulting from other indefinite practices to be recognized as instances of trafficking. For example, there still exists a debate among scholars on whether or not to define mail-order brides as victims (trafficked women) or agents (happily-wedded brides). A woman who secures a foreign husband through the internet, friends, or a marriage broker is considered a mail-order bride. Although the mail-order bride business has been called bride trafficking by some, there are others like Nicole Constable who point out that women who partake in mail-order bride arrangements are "not necessarily duped or seduced" (1995: 71). [58] However, the question of whether or not women openly consent to these marriages is irrelevant, according to the Trafficking Protocol's definition, so long as they result in exploitation. It has also been argued that even the relationships that result in 'happy' marriages, are exploitative in that they are sought out with the purpose of establishing a relationship of inequality, whereby the husband guarantees he will be able to exert his will over the wife.[59] There have even been reports of mail-order brides that have "become trapped in an environment of slavery and prostitution," either made into victims of "spousal prostitution," whereby the

[58] Sine Plambech, furthers Constable's argument, claiming that Thai women who are perceived as mail-order brides are actually "living out [their] role[s] as… player[s] in the global care economy" (2010: 53).
[59] Even in Plembach's own work this sort of discourse arises. Plembach (2010) quotes Jans, the Danish husband of one Thai woman: "… [Danish] men without wives look at men who have a Thai wife and think 'I'd like one of those, too'… Danish women can be difficult and complicated… they make some big demands" (57). Although Plembach argues that "Thai brides are not a commodity that men purchase and consume" (2010: 48), Jans's own words suggest otherwise.

husband receives money from individuals in exchange for having sex with the wife, or "forced domestic labor" (McCabe 2008: 25-26, 45).[60] It seems that whenever marriage is involved, legality is not questioned. However, this is problematic as marital rape is also a known phenomenon.[61] In Kyrgyzstan, a non-consensual kidnapping is also legitimated when it results in a marriage. However, a legitimate marriage in the eyes of the community is not a legitimate marriage in the eyes of the state. Furthermore, it neither nullifies the coercion exerted to occasion it nor the exploitation that results from it.

In terms of obtaining more political leverage, it is important to step away from the notion that the institution of marriage is irreproachable and promote, instead, its inclusion into the human trafficking definition itself or, at least, its interpretation and conceptualization. Further association of non-consensual bride kidnapping with human trafficking will allow for its additional association with organized crime. Although this paper does not intend to argue that non-consensual bride kidnapping, if viewed as human trafficking, is therefore a form of organized crime, it offers activists a way in which they can promote an understanding of the practice as a criminal act. Oftentimes, organized crime is associated with large networks or rings. However, organized crime can be carried out by core groups of "a small number of individuals" (McCabe 2008: 30). If we consider Coomaraswamy's definition, which implicates not only the kidnapper but those complicit in the crime, then it can be argued that a kidnapper's friends and family make up the core group; around them exists "a larger group of associated individuals" and an even "larger number of peripheral players," namely the local authorities, such as the aksakals

[60] For a more in-depth report on mail-order bride cases that have resulted in slavery and prostitution and forced domestic labor please see: S. Cullen, The Miserable Lives of Mail Order Brides. *Women in Action* 3 (2002): 6-9 and M. Crandall, K. Senturia, M. Sullivan, and S. Shiu-Thornton, No Way Out: Russian-Speaking Women's Experiences with Domestic Violence. *Journal of Interpersonal Behavior* 20, no. 8 (2005): 941-958, respectively.
[61] Even in some countries, a rapist can escape prosecution by marrying his victim. Just recently a young Moroccan woman named Amina Filali, who was forced by her parents to marry her rapist, committed suicide. For more on this case, please see: http://www.475lefilm.org/about-the-film.html.

and police officers, all the way through the complicit state authorities. Many actors are involved in the proliferation of non-consensual bride kidnappings. Therefore, associating the practice with human trafficking and, further, with organized crime will only strengthen its recognition as a crime and not a custom.

Non-consensual Bride Trafficking

For the sake of clarity, this paper will employ Anne T. Gallagher's (2010) three elements approach to discuss the implications of the unwarranted and forced movement of young women during non-consensual bride kidnappings. Gallagher divides the Trafficking Protocol's definition to denote: (1) "an *action,*" (2) "the *means* used to secure that action," and (3) "the *purpose* of the action for which the means were used" (2010: 29). This paper will also interject with relevant words, phrases, or clauses from Coomaraswamy's own definition to support claims regarding the Trafficking Protocol's definition.

Action

The first element of the Trafficking Protocol definition "relates to an *action*" and is denoted by the "recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of persons." Focusing solely on this first clause, we find that all of these elements can be observed in cases of non-consensual bride kidnapping. Kidnapped brides are "recruit[ed]" by men for the purpose of becoming their wives; they are always "transport[ed]" from the place they are kidnapped, be it the local market, the street, or their very home, to the groom's home; this transportation involves in and of itself a "transfer," whereby victims are moved from one place to another, from one village to another, and more symbolically, from one home to another. Returning to Coomaraswamy's definition, this movement does not necessarily entail crossing a nation's borders. Non-consensual bride kidnappings result in the "placing or holding of such person… in

a community other than the one in which such person lived at the time of the original act." This notion of "placing" and "holding" is further reinforced by the Trafficking Protocol, which specifies the "harbouring" of victims; kidnapped brides are also "harbour[ed]" by their in-laws. Finally, inherent in the act of taking is the corresponding act of "receiv[ing];" in non-consensual bride kidnappings, young women are received, as the kidnappers' families welcome the bride's forceful delivery.

Means

The second element of the Trafficking Protocol specifies the means by which acts considered trafficking are carried out through the use of "threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, of abduction, of fraud, of deception, of the abuse of power or of a position of vulnerability or of the giving or receiving of payments or benefits to achieve the consent of a person having control over another person." Let us first turn to the use of force, an aspect that has been widely documented and seems to have become inherent to the kidnapping process. The kidnapper and his friends literally snatch up the bride-to-be, usually by carrying her and forcing her into a runaway vehicle. Once inside the vehicle, the kidnappers ignore the young woman's efforts to resist and effectively inhibit her ability to move or break free.[62] Women have reportedly been "dragged… down the street," "dragged… into the car," hav[ing] [their] hands "broke[n]," being "beat[en]," or having their mouths and heads "covered" (HRW 2006: 110; Handrahan 2004: 220). The use of physical force is not limited simply to the initial stages of the kidnapping. Upon arriving at the groom's home, the young woman will be dragged out of the car and handed over to the women of the family, who corner her in a room, sometimes pinning her

[62] Aisulu A., one of Human Rights Watch's respondents, claims to have been "put… in a car" although she "cried and tried to refuse" (HRW 2006: 99). Similarly, Elmira E. claims, "there were so many of them [men]… [she] didn't have the strength to fight them off;" she claims to have been "grabbed" and "forced into the car" [62] (HRW 101).

down or holding her by the arms to prevent her escape.[63] The use of force goes on as long as deemed necessary, or until the young bride surrenders and allegedly consents.

The use of force is further supported in Coomaraswamy's definition by the inclusion of the term "violence;" in other words, force that is both physical and sexual. As noted above, women are sometimes beaten by her kidnappers.[64] Unfortunately, rape is also a harsh reality some women must endure.[65] Some NGO leaders believe rape occurs "in all or most cases of abduction," although one expert was cited as saying the opposite, that "it was not widespread" (HRW 2006: 109).[66] Similarly, while the women who participated in Handrahan's study claimed that "they, or their friends, were raped during the process," none of the men admitted to having committed the act (2004: 218).[67] It is difficult to know whether rape is widespread, but that it occurs has been confirmed through women's own testimonies and cannot be ignored, nor the fear that its possibility represents for Kyrgyz women. The Center for Women based in Bishkek estimates that out of the 11,800 girls abducted annually, around 2,000 of them suffer rape in the process (Nogoibaeva 2012).

Furthermore, deception is also often used, as young women are fooled into perpetrators' cars under the pretense that they will be driven home. Instead, however, they are taken to the

[63] Feruza F. describes how she was forced "behind the curtain,"[63] where she was "grabbed… by [her] wrists and ankles and forced… onto the floor" (HRW 2006: 102).
[64] This kind of physical violence often extends into her marriage; many of the women who were kidnapped without their consent, were also victims of domestic violence later on (HRW 2006: 117). Also, there seems to be a relation between the violence a woman experiences during her kidnapping and the amount of alcohol her kidnappers have ingested beforehand (Handrahan 2004: 220).
[65] Aisulu A. recalled feeling "tired of fighting" and allowed for her new husband to have his way with her body. Similarly, Feruza F. claims that her husband had "forced himself on [her]" the first night and subsequent nights; although she would "fight him off and try to sleep… he'd fight with [her] and hit [her] and force [her]" to have sexual relations with him. Her mother-in-law even "yelled at [her] for not wanting to sleep with her son" (HRW 2006: 109, 110).
[66] Ernest Abdyjaparov's 2007 film *Boz Salkyn* chose to romanticize the cinematic kidnapping by depicting the kidnapper, Sagyn, as being understanding of Anara's refusal to consummate the marriage on the first night; thus, we see Sagyn pierce his own skin with a knife and let his own blood stain the sheets which must be displayed the next day as proof of the marriage's consummation.
[67] Still, Handrahan also believes the consummation of these marriages "may involve rape" (2004: 209).

grooms' homes.[68] Even female friends of the kidnapped brides can be culpable, as they are sometimes the ones responsible for tricking the bride-to-be.[69] Such deception may even be defined as "fraud," as it constitutes a "wrongful or criminal deception intended to result in financial or personal gain," resulting in an act that is punishable by law.[70] Considering the possibility of fraud only further reinforces the practice's parallels to the conditions stipulated by the human trafficking definition. Finally, because "abduction" naturally takes place through kidnapping, and bride kidnapping has even been labeled bride abduction by some scholars (Werner 2009), this paper will not discuss this in further detail.

Moreover, both "the abuse of power," or "authority" as Coomaraswamy denotes it, and of young women's "position of vulnerability," form part of the basic elements through which non-consensual bride kidnappings are carried out. The abuse of power or authority can be physical, such as when men exert their collective strength over women, as we saw earlier. In this way, they are exploiting her position of vulnerability, as she will always be weaker in comparison to combined strength of the male group and, being caught by surprise, can never adequately prepare to resist the initial snatch. Yet, the abuse of power and vulnerability can also be social. Adults and elders, being highly respected in Kyrgyz society, exert their influence over young women in the earlier convincing stage, later on in the letter-writing stage,[71] and finally in the acceptance stage. Older women will try to get the young bride to accept the white marriage scarf and, if she

[68] Such was the case with Feruza F., who was told "her parents had summoned her." Similarly, when Nargiza N. was being driven home on the way back from a party she had attended, her driver "took another turn" and took her to the groom's home. Likewise, when Shoira S. was being driven home by a suitor she had just openly rejected, he also seized the opportunity to take her to his family's home (HRW 2006: 103-104).

[69] For example, Aisulu A. had been invited to the party she attended before being kidnapped by a friend who knew beforehand the kidnapping would take place (HRW 2006: 104). Also, as seen in the VICE documentary, Nurgul's friend Nazgul conspires with the kidnappers to arrange her kidnapping. She lures Nurgul out of her home where she is snatched up by her kidnappers (VICE 2011).

[70] As defined by the Oxford Dictionary.

[71] After a bride 'consents' to the forced union, the groom's family usually goes to the bride's family's home to apologize for having kidnapped their daughter, also known as *achuu-basar*, or "anger suppression" (Aitmatova 2009: 3). To further assuage the situation, they usually present the bride's parents with a letter written by their daughter, in which it is written that she is well and consents to the marriage.

refuses, move on to remind her of her soon-to-be tarnished reputation and threaten her by saying that she will be cursed so that she will never be happy, let alone married (Lom 2004). In the letter writing stage, the young bride's in-laws will hover over her, making sure that she writes to her parents that she has consented (Werner 2009: 318). Finally, in the acceptance stage, as we have mentioned, parents will urge their daughters to stay, out of fear of a tarnished reputation (Werner 2009: 323). This abuse of both power and of the young bride's position of vulnerability can also be considered a form of coercion, one that is buttressed by psychological and social pressures.

Delving into the latter part of the second element, which tells "of the giving or receiving of payments or benefits," we see yet again how the specifications required to label an act as human trafficking can be identified in instances of non-consensual bride kidnapping. The giving or receiving of payments is equivalent to the payment of the bride price, which can in and of itself be seen as a monetary transaction that results in marriage. The men who engage in bride kidnappings are not exempt from the payment of a bride price; however, it is widely understood that a kidnapping results in a significantly lowered bride price, if any (Werner 2009: 323). The payment of a bride price can "be seen as compensation to the family [of the bride] which has lost an adult member" and thus, has lowered capacity for "productive labor" (Bates 1974: 274). This payment does not represent a loss for the groom's family, as what they lose in actual capital, they assume to replace with human capital, or a source of free labor. In a similar vein, the bride's family benefits from the added monetary income.

Purpose

The third element within the Trafficking Protocol references the purpose, namely exploitation, for which an action is carried out through the means stated above: "Exploitation

shall include, at a minimum, the exploitation of the prostitution of others or other forms of sexual exploitation, forced labour or services, slavery or practices similar to slavery, servitude or the removal of organs." This final element is vital in identifying non-consensual bride kidnapping as human trafficking. While a kidnapper or his family's intentions in kidnapping a young bride may vary on a case by case basis, and are difficult to affirm, based on what is specified by the Trafficking Protocol and what has been observed in cases of non-consensual bride kidnapping, the practice can be considered human trafficking, as it often results in, and is carried out for the purpose of putting young women in situations that could be defined as "sexual exploitation" or "forced labour or services" – and even "slavery."

As aforementioned, human trafficking is often associated solely with sexual exploitation that results in forced prostitution, or exploitation carried out for "commercial purposes." However, sexual exploitation can also take place for "non-commercial purposes" (Scarpa 2008: 22). Non-commercial exploits include the mail-order bride phenomenon as well as early and forced marriages. With the phenomenon of early and forced marriage comes the exploitation of the young woman's body, which, in cases of bride kidnapping, is valued so long as it is capable of rearing children and satisfying the husbands' sexual needs.[72] Furthermore, the expectation that a kidnapped bride will satisfy her husband's sexual wants presents another instance of sexual exploitation, whereby a young girl who forcibly enters into marriage is also compulsorily defiled by her husband. As discussed earlier, rape is quite common in non-consensual kidnapped marriages. Just as when a woman that comes into prostitution after being forcibly trafficked, a

[72] Ainura A. recalls being unable to get pregnant during her first year of marriage; within that time, her mother-in-law treated abused her verbally, making her worthless – as she was indeed worthless to the mother. Still, when Ainura finally became pregnant not once but twice, her mother-in-law went as far as to liken her to a dog (HRW 2006: 9); just two years after being married, Ainura was abandoned by her husband and her family. Similarly, Shoira S. recounts the pressure she felt to become pregnant. Ultimately she was unable to, as her husband was not only mentally ill but impotent (HRW 2006: 116).

kidnapped bride is expected to provide a sexual service to her husband. In forcing his new bride to have sex with him, a Kyrgyz man is exerting his "male sex-right," or his right over female bodies (van den Anker and Doomernik 2006: 48). In other words, the marriage 'contract', which enters into force after either the first sexual encounter or a Muslim cleric's consecration, is very much a contract "establish[ing] men's legitimate access at all time to women's physical persons" allowing them free reign over the exploitation of his wife's body for sexual services (Id: 49).[73] Rape is even employed to further coerce a young woman to submit to marriage (HRW 2006: 91).

The exploitation of labor and other services as well as conditions similar to that which we consider slavery are also observed in the homes of non-consensually kidnapped brides. As discussed earlier, parents, particularly mothers, usually pressure their sons to kidnap a bride because they want their daughter-in-law to take over the daily domestic chores, "function[ing] much like servants to their mothers-in-law" (HRW 2006: 118). Thus, many young brides are kidnapped with the intention of making them "take over the household duties" (HRW 2006: 92) and even engaging in unpaid agricultural work.[74] Victims of non-consensual bride kidnappings are also often kept in isolation and are refused the opportunity to have contact with their "natal family" and are "forbidden to leave the house" (HRW 2006: 118). Lastly, they are subject to domestic abuse at the hands of their husbands[75].

[73] Feruza F. recalls being raped "on a regular basis" (HRW 2006: 75).
[74] Farida F. describes having to do "practically everything in the house"; Feruza F. recalls having to "milk the cows," "prepare the breakfast," "make the beds," "clean the house," "make bread," "make lunch," "pick apples," and then "make another meal for everyone" for dinner – every day; likewise, Elmira E. had to not only do "everything around the house" but also "t[ake] care of the cattle and the garden that was five hectares." Similarly, Tursunai T. was "forced to work every day herding… [her kidnappers'] sheep;" it was a part of "the family business," yet she never saw the "profit" or "owned a share in it." Thus, when she fled, she felt that she had worked for 15 years and yet "had nothing to show for it." Furthermore, Gulzat G. recounted having "a separate room" where she was to remain all day; she was only allowed to enter the house to clean, a task she was to complete in under two hours and, upon completion, was sent back to her room by her mother-in-law (HRW 2006: 118-119).
[75] "If a man uses violence to get a wife, it's a signal that he will use violence in the future," said an intern at Diamond, a Kyrgyz NGO (HRW 2006: 117).

At least one of the three elements discussed above "must be present for a situation of 'trafficking in persons' to be recognized and for the Trafficking Protocol and Organized Crime Convention to become operational within a given fact-situation." However, when referring to the trafficking of children, the means specified under the second element of the definition "are waived."[76] This final clause of the definition is particularly relevant to our discussion as child marriages as a result of non-consensual bride kidnappings through underage marriages are also on the rise in Kyrgyzstan. In fact, early and forced marriages are viewed as "contemporary form[s] of slavery" by the UN Working Group on Contemporary Forms of Slavery (Scarpa 2008: 26). Elena Voronina, member of the Kyrgyz Non-commercial Organizations' Coordination Council and Interbilim Human Rights Center and child's rights activist, holds this belief. Voronina states that according to statistical data from 2006, 12 percent of women were married before the age of 18. More recently, statistics show that 14.2 percent of women were married before the age of 18 in rural areas and 9 percent in cities (Blua and Ashakeeva 2012). While the Family Code of the Kyrgyz Republic allows "for girls as young as 16 to be legally married in some cases," when local government authorities find that there is good reason for them to marry at a younger age" (HRW 2006: 17), what exactly constitutes a 'good reason' is not specified, leaving the matter up to the local government authorities to arbitrate – a fact that is quite problematic, particularly because kidnappers are not concerned for the target bride's age.[77] However, men do express a concern for finding a young enough bride, as at 25, women are considered past their prime. Moreover, simply because a kidnapped bride may be still considered a child does not mean she is exempted for the routine exploitation that takes place. Children are

[76] Therefore, identifying child victims of trafficking "can be expected to be easier" (Gallagher 2010: 29). However, that has not been the case in Kyrgyzstan.
[77] When Ilyas was asked for his kidnapped bride's name and age he simply stated, "I don't know," showing no concern for knowing her name, let alone her age (Butts 2009).

also subjected to forms of "sexual exploitation," "forced labour" and "slavery" and are "often denied opportunities for education" (Blua and Ashakeeva 2012), making them especially vulnerable to such forms of exploitation.[78]

In summary, it is now evident that the main elements of non-consensual bride kidnapping almost directly coincide with the actions, means, and purposes specified by the Trafficking Protocol's definition of human trafficking, the internationally recognized definition. As mentioned above, labeling non-consensual bride kidnapping as human trafficking may or may not be useful for activists. It can very well be that human trafficking activists, in the more traditional sense, might not want non-consensual bride kidnapping to mar their campaigns, as the practice in and of itself evokes so much confusion and ambiguity. Others might even try to discredit the argument by claiming that the ends do justify the means. In other words, for such people, a kidnapping is justified so long as it results in successful marriage, however that may be defined. Additionally, by labeling the practice as human trafficking, a debate may arise as to whether or not the label would be applied solely to the act of kidnapping a bride without her consent or if it would include the marriage that results from it. Following the human trafficking argument, one might suggest that a happy bride could be suffering from Stockholm syndrome, whereby she has become attached to and empathetic of her captor (HRW 2006: 116; McCabe 2008: 48). Surely this would only take on more meaning the moment a kidnapper goes from being simply a captor to the father of kidnapped bride's children. Moreover, the issue of consent needs to be further explored. Cynthia Werner (2009) discusses different levels of consent, but it is necessary to understand the moment at which Kyrgyz people give and perceive consent being

[78] Many girls are kidnapped just before finishing their studies, effectively nullifying they years they put toward obtaining an education. One young woman, Alimakhan, was kidnapped at 16 near the southern city of Batkin. Today she lives with her three year old at her parent's house, with no support from or contact to her former husband, who abandoned her, or his family (Blua and Ashakeeva 2012).

given. These would make compelling areas for future research, but they go beyond the scope of this paper.

Conclusion

Room for Hope: Recent Developments and Civil Society's Contributions

In recent years, the anti-bride kidnapping movement has gained momentum in Kyrgyzstan. This is due to the relentless efforts of several civil society actors who have brought to the attention of the Kyrgyz people the laws in place forbidding the act, as well as the harsh reality of kidnapped women's experiences, urging the Kyrgyz people to recognize the harmful consequences that the practice can have on young women. The movement picked up particularly after three young Kyrgyz women committed suicide, refusing to accept their fates as kidnapped brides (Asylbekova 2012). Various civil society actors have been actively campaigning and engaging Kyrgyz people to stop non-consensual bride kidnappings.

Most notably, the Bishkek Feminists civic group seems to have been at the forefront of the anti-bride kidnapping movement and has promoted awareness in various capacities. They united with several other women's organizations for their "Campaign 155," which has brought together men and women for the cause. '155' refers to the article in the Kyrgyz Criminal Code that prohibits bride kidnapping (Abdurasulov 2012). In related campaigns advocating for "an increase in the quota of women in Parliament," and in response to MP Kozhobek Ryspaev's statement comparing livestock to women, they have released campaign posters that challenge established notions and assumptions (Nogoibaeva 2012).[79] At one point, they also collaborated with young "nomadic theater" group '705' to further their advocacy efforts. '705' uses different media, such as their blog, drawings, cartoons, and live performances to expose and challenge the

[79] Please see Appendix B, Figures 1 and 2.

authority and oppression – and within that, patriarchy – present in Kyrgyz society. The group is particularly known for its short hand-drawn animation movies[80], which are categorized into 'Patriarch' and 'Kitchen Stories.' The former critiques the patriarchal system in place, in which an individual comes to embody authority; the latter exposes "patriarchs in everyday life" and the oppression of women. The 'Kitchen Stories' resulted from a joint effort between '705' and Bishkek Feminists[81] (Sodiqov 2012).

Another organization called Open Line hosted a video-making workshop for Kyrgyz youth in March of 2012. Four videos resulted from the workshop. The first video is supposed to act as a reminder that bride kidnapping is both "illegal and punishable by law."[82] The second urges parents to accept their daughters' decision to return, fighting "the stigma attached."[83] The text in the video reads, "You were always there to support your daughter. Now let her make her own choice." The third video encourages Kyrgyz women to "resist forced unions" and "take their destiny into their own hands."[84] The final video promotes the use of cell phones to dial 102 for the hotline for kidnapped brides when one witness a kidnapping[85]. It reminds viewers that "every girl is someone's daughter or sister"[86] (Rickleton 2012b).

[80] The group's head, Marat Raiymkulov, claims that the notion that women are viewed as "second-class [citizens]" is something the group has witnessed since childhood. They hope that their work not only makes contributions to "art but also towards social development."
[81] Please see Appendix C for links to the videos.
[82] The video shows a young man arriving at his home with his kidnapped bride covered in a sheet and draped over his shoulder; when he places her on the floor inside the house, his mother and the other women who are expected to pressure the bride are caught by surprise when, upon uncovering the bride, they find three Kyrgyz policemen. The sound of sirens plays in the background.
[83] The video begins with scenes of a young girl that falls and hurts her knee; her mother is there to kiss it and make it better. It moves on to another scene where the same girl asks her father for help with her homework. In the next scene we see the same girl now as a young woman, being snatched up by kidnappers. After managing to escape, she runs back to her house. Her parents welcome her back with open arms. The text in the video reads, "You were always there to support your daughter. Now let her make her own choice."
[84] The video depicts Kurmanjan Datka running through rugged mountains until she ends up looking with strength over the horizon. Kurmanjan Datka is a famous in Kyrgyz history; she "escaped an arranged marriage" and went on to become "The Queen of Alai". Alai is "a mountainous region in southern Kyrgyzstan".
[85] The video depicts a passerby watching on as a girl is kidnapped and other on-lookers laugh and film the scene with their cell phones.
[86] See Appendix C for links to the videos.

Finally, the Women's Support Centre is another organization that has been actively promoting awareness regarding the harmful aspects of bride kidnapping. More recently, they organized a bike ride in Bishkek in October; the slogan for the event was "Cycling and I are against violence." They have also hosted football matches and a flag-installation activity in which more than 100 participants placed thousands of colored flags in center of Bishkek. 9800 red flag were placed to "symbolize women who were kidnapped and married against their will;" 2000 white flags were placed to "symbolize the quantity of women suffering sexual violence;" 7500 violet flags were installed to signify the number of "women who had officially complained about domestic violence." The Women's Support Centre is a grantee of the UN Women's Fund for Gender Equality (UN Women 2013). Still, the UN has not been the only donor to contribute to the development of Kyrgyzstan's civil society and their efforts against non-consensual bride kidnapping. The American University in Bishkek has also been involved in pioneering efforts that led to the first studies that gave us qualitative evidence of the practice's proliferation and to the first educational efforts that have taken place in various Kyrgyz schools.

As a result of these initiatives and the pressure that they have placed on the Kyrgyz government, Parliament recently passed a bill that extended the penalty for bride kidnapping from three years in prison to 10 years. Soon after, the first kidnapper was sentenced to 6 years in prison. Although the accused has now appealed the court ruling, and may be acquitted of the charges and freed before serving his full term, this is undeniably a landmark occasion in the ongoing campaign against non-consensual bride kidnapping. What will become of the practice and of those complicit with it, we do not know. However, as more and more opposition groups make their voices heard, change is sure to follow.

Concluding Remarks

This paper explores the paradox of contemporary Kyrgyzstan: despite subscribing to a seemingly progressive human rights agenda, thousands of women are unwillingly caught up in non-consensual bride kidnappings, with dire consequences to themselves, their families, and the very social fabric of the nation. An understanding of bride kidnapping, this paper has suggested, requires a close examination of its emerging historical and ethnographic context. As a widespread social phenomenon, however, bride kidnapping is not merely accountable in and through pre-existing nomadic social structures, the accumulated effect of over a century of Russo-Soviet rule, or the government's reluctance to enact and enforce existing legislation. Rather, the argument put forward considers non-consensual bride kidnapping in light of the broader context of state ideologies and nation-building efforts. In fact, the theoretical and conceptual framing put forth in this paper departs from the constraints of traditional customs or the unmovable principle of history and deeply entrenched cultural norms to highlight instead the parallels – social, legal, and political – with other contexts of exploitation. It is in dialogue with other instances of human trafficking, this paper suggests, that a more nuanced understanding of non-consensual kidnapping practices can emerge without ascribing cultural norms as the sole determinant of its existence.

The voices of women have for too long been silenced, lost to the dictates of state rulers, parliament legislatures, and other figures of authority. By calling our attention to this predicament, this paper hopes to have given these women – objects of violence and exploitation – their legitimate role as social actors in the plenitude of their rights and purveyors of the nation's future and not simply as nameless and defenseless victims, thus opening an avenue for hope and change.

Glossary

The definitions for the entries in this glossary hail from the following sources: Abazov, Rafis (2004); Abazov, Rafis (2007); Aitmatova, Rozetta (2009); Gullette, David (2010); Iğmen, Ali (2012).

A note on the transliteration of Kyrgyz and Russian terms: Although more than one spelling exists for some terms, only one spelling is used throughout the paper, for the sake of clarity; alternate spellings can be found in this list.

Term (alternate spelling, if any)	**Origin**	**Definition**
achuu-basar	Kyrgyz	Literally "anger suppression;" the name attributed to the process by which the groom's family asks the bride's family for forgiveness.
adat	Kyrgyz	Central Asian customary law.
ail (aiyl)	Kyrgyz	Village or rural settlement.
aksakal	Kyrgyz	Elder or administrator; literally "white beard."
akyn	Kyrgyz	Respected bard within a community.
ala kachuu (kyz ala kachuu)	Kyrgyz	Bride kidnapping; bride stealing.
böz-üi (bozui)	Kyrgyz	Nomadic felt tent or yurt.
byt	Russian	Everyday life.
dukhovnyi	Russian	The spiritual.
glasnost	Russian	Policy of openness.
grazhdanstvennost	Russian	Nationality.
hujum (hurjum)	---	Soviet campaign against the veil; literally "onslaught."
jeti ata	Kyrgyz	A person's seven patrilineal ancestors.
Jogorku Kenesh (Jogorku Kengesh)	Kyrgyz	Parliament of the Kyrgyz Republic.
jooluk	Kyrgyz	Headscarf.
kalym (kalyng)	Kyrgyz	Bride price.
kolkhoz	Russian	Collective farm.
komsomol	---	The Communist Union of Youth of
komuz	Kyrgyz	Small, three-stringed guitar.
korenizatsiia (korenizatsiya)	Russian	Policy of recruiting non-Russians into the Communist Party; literally "nativization."
kul'turnost'	Russian	Culturedness.
kymyz (kumis; kumys)	Kyrgyz	Kyrgyz national drink; fermented milk.
madrasa	Arabic	Islamic seminary.
manaschy (manaschi)	Kyrgyz	Bard who recites the epic poem, *Manas*.

mankourtisation (mankurtisation)	---	"Forgetting of roots;" p. mank(o)urt.
moldo	Kyrgyz	Mullah, or Muslim cleric.
narodnost'	Russian	Ethnicity.
paranja (hujum; hurjum)	---	Veil worn by Uzbek and southern Kyrgyz women.
perestroika	Russian	Gorbachev's policy of political and economic reform; literally "restructuring."
slianiie	Russian	The coming together of cultures.
toi	Kyrgyz	A traditional celebration.
tyundyuk (tündük)	Russian	The latticed smoke hole in the roof of a yurt.

Appendix A: Map of Central Asia

Appendix B: Campaign Photos

Figure 1. Bishkek Feminists remind, "Woman, your place is in THIS house".
Image credit: Bishkek Feminists

Figure 2. MP Ryspaev, as he steals a lamb-bride, says: "I will not eat you!"
Image credit: Bishkek Feminists

Figure 3. Activists place colored flags in Bishkek.
Photo credit: UN Women/Eric Gourlan

Appendix C: Video List

'705'

'Patriarch'

1. 'What Would People Say?'
   http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WwO8xrj0qPg

2. 'Sack'
   http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L7wDVgn4WWI&feature=youtu.be

3. 'Who Am I?'
   http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w6e-hXphK1U

'Kitchen Stories'

4. 'How Is This Possible?'
   http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hUBgCgPy8lc&feature=youtu.be

5. 'Vacuum Cleaner'
   http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xS9DlOKJpsA&feature=youtu.be

Source: Sodiqov, Alexander. "Kyrgyzstan: Patriarchal Society as Seen by Artists." *Global Voices*, July 18, 2012. http://globalvoicesonline.org/2012/07/18/kyrgyzstan-patriarchal-society-as-seen-by-artists/.

Open Line

Results from Video-Making Workshop

1. Cat in the Bag / Abductions – A Criminal Offense
   http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=B4GARB5BMDs

2. Do not be afraid to take your daughter back!
   http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=m4vuyOabMfk

3. Kurmanjan's Choice
   http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=1YwF4J0sy9U

4. Call 102! When you see 'it like that'
   http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=fM7vF1hDbzE

Source: Rickleton, Chris. 2012b. "Kyrgyzstan: Civic Initiatives Seek to Tackle Bride-Kidnapping." *Global Voices*, June 1, 2012. http://globalvoicesonline.org/2012/06/01/kyrgyzstan-civic-initiatives-seek-to-tackle-bride-kidnapping/.

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Part 2: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bU-Q-7jEAds&list=PLhpE1CJOmGWaEonPvylIzLYxdzvTlKjmK&index=3.

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