

**Bride Abduction in Central Asia:  
Marking a Shift Towards Patriarchy Through  
Local Discourses of Shame and Tradition**



Cynthia Werner  
Department of Anthropology  
Texas A&M University

# Outline

- Case Studies of Bride Abduction
  - Typical sequence
  - Variations
- The Historical Context
- Discourses of Shame and a Woman's Decision to Stay
- Discourses of Tradition and Beliefs about the Historical Legitimacy of Bride Abduction

# Case Studies of Bride Abduction

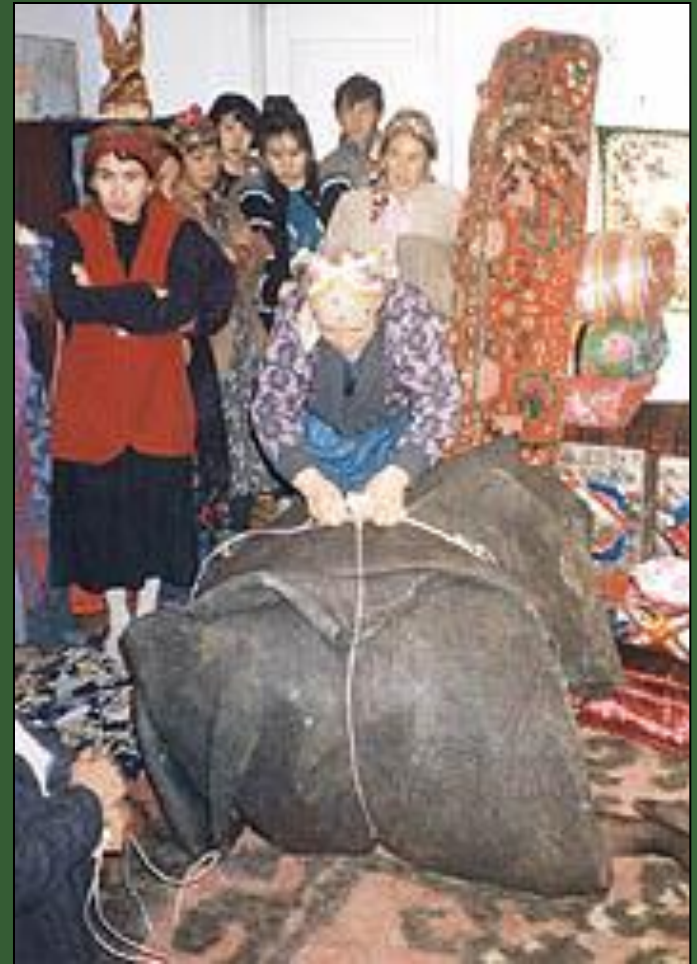
- Laura
- Zhanna



The Betashar Ceremony

# What Happens When a Bride is Kidnapped?

- The Abduction
- The Scarf
- The Letter
- The Apology
- The In-Laws Arrive
- Betashar Ceremony



Opening a Dowry after the Marriage is Finalized

# Some Motives for Bride Kidnapping

- Bride's parents object
- Less expensive
- Less time
- The bride objects
- The groom is shy
- Somebody else might marry her



# The Historical Context: The Pre-Soviet Period

- Arranged marriages - norm
- Kidnap marriages - rare
- Daughters-in-law had low status
- Women had no formal education
- Women did not work outside of home



# The Historical Context: The Soviet Period



- Women in Soviet Central Asia were “liberated” by the Soviet state

- ~ 70 years of progressive policies, beginning in the mid-1920s
- ~ Laws on the “Crimes of Custom”
- ~ High Levels of Education
- ~ Many women worked outside the home

# Post-Soviet Transformations



- New economic realities
- Nationalism and the “re-traditionalization” of gender ideals
- Simultaneous infiltration of “Western” fashions and lifestyles that are more sexually explicit

- Family honor is linked to female modesty
- Public knowledge of immodest behavior (even if it is only a rumor) can be shameful
- Marriage restores the family's honor

## Shame and the Decision to Stay



# Female Agency and Acts of Resistance

- Escape
- Resisting Scarf and Letter



Photo Credit: Fatima Sartbaeva

# Questioning the Historical Authenticity of Bride Abduction

- Kazakhstan
  - Views of Historical Origins of Bride Abduction
  - Moral judgments against kidnapping
- Kyrgyzstan
  - Popular belief that bride abduction is a national tradition

# Conclusions



# Questions?

## Acknowledgements:

- Wenner-Gren Foundation
- IREX
- SSRC
- NCEEER

Publications on bride abduction available at:  
[www.cynthiawerner.com](http://www.cynthiawerner.com)

# Changing Values in Post-Soviet Society

- Rise of National Identity
  - Defining what it means to be Kazakh
  - Revival of National Traditions

## SIMULTANEOUSLY:

- Desire to be Viewed as “Modern”
- Both processes affect women’s lives

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Questions?