

The Pride of Being Kidnapped: Women's Views on Bride Kidnapping in Tetrtskaro, Georgia

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Abstract

Bride kidnapping was considered by Georgian ethnographers to be an alternative form of marriage in earlier times, when men were not able or willing to pay the high bride price. The capture of a bride was one alternative way to marry a woman and gain social status without going into debt. Nevertheless, society saw bride capture as a violation of existing traditional marriage rules that was punishable by traditional law. Since Soviet times, bride kidnapping has been forbidden by law; nowadays bride kidnappings do occur, but rarely in comparison to earlier times.

Historical Traditions

Bride kidnapping has to be divided into planned (voluntary) kidnapping and forced (involuntary) kidnapping. In my interviews, I found that both forms still occur in Tetrtskaro (Kvemo Kartli). This article deals with the reasons for bride kidnapping and the question "Why does bride kidnapping still happen in times of legal justice?" The research was conducted in the region of Kvemo Kartli and its surrounding villages from July 2009 until August 2009 and from March 2010 until November 2010. I recorded approximately 65 interviews among mostly women aged between 14 and 90. The research question deals with the strategies of bride kidnapping and where socially gendered conceptions of honor and shame are involved. These perceptions about social norms influence men and women in their activities, as they do in the case of bride kidnapping.

Tetrtskaro belongs to the region of Kvemo Kartli and is considered a multi-ethnic town, 35 km south of the capital of Tbilisi, where Armenians, Azeri, Russians and Georgians live. Before the collapse of the Soviet Union, Greeks and Azeri were the majority of inhabitants in this region. After the independence of Georgia in 1991, most of the Greek and Armenian population migrated to Greece or to Russia. The abandoned houses were occupied by Georgians from the mountainous regions of Racha and Svaneti, who had to leave their homes due to economic and ecological reasons in post-Soviet Georgia.

Bride kidnapping was considered the least favorable possibility to get married in earlier times and according to Georgian ethnographers, it was not considered a "traditional way of marriage." Capturing a bride, however, was daily practice before Soviet times. Voluntary captures as well as involuntary captures were practiced for a variety of reasons, for example unhappy engagements or to avoid problems within the families.

The traditional ritual of marriage was very expensive and the preparations or gifts for the family and the bride could ruin the groom financially. Therefore bride

kidnapping was also one way to escape from high costs. Such reasons are still relevant: explanations of "saving money" were given to me when I asked for the reasons for bride kidnapping nowadays. Although there is no longer a bride price, which has to be given to the bride and her family, the traditional wedding ceremony includes gifts to the family and a banquet for up to 500 people, especially in the countryside. The costs are tremendous.

The kidnapping of a bride was seen as a violation of existing traditional marriage rules and had little respect from the head of the family. Therefore, it was considered a shame for the whole family that had to be reconciled either with money, cattle or with reconciliation in front of a religious icon. The contempt of the ritual could cause conflict and even blood feuds among the participants. The ritual of reconciliation was therefore performed to restore order within society.

Contemporary Practices

The social perceptions of gendered social behavior and gendered moral norms contribute to bride kidnapping. While women are expected to be bashful and modest, men are supposed to act bravely and assertively. These social conceptions contribute to the fact that bride kidnapping still exists in the society of Tetrtskaro. Women, who were involuntary kidnapped, did in most of the cases not return back home to their families. They faced fear of social degradation, especially when the kidnapper or others spread rumors about the kidnapping and the loss of the bride's virginity, which is considered a woman's honor. If her virginity is put in question, there is no way to prove her integrity. This is an enormous social pressure for the girl and her family. Therefore the kidnapped young woman will generally agree to the marriage to keep up her individual honor, but also for the reason of maintaining the honor of her family, i.e. the integrity of its reputation and its social status.

Nevertheless involuntary bride kidnapping is still considered an acceptable way to marry, in addition to a

love match, arranged marriage and elopement, if there is no violence (e.g. rape) involved. Involuntary bride kidnappings take place rarely, but when they do happen, they are seen as a peccadillo and seldom as a criminal act, which makes it difficult to get information about cases and makes it difficult for the kidnapped girl to report the case to the police and return home without fear of facing a life stigmatized by social disgrace.

Forced bride kidnapping is one possibility for a man to force a girl into marriage. The kidnapping follows in most cases along a typical pattern: The kidnapper will gather his friends and they prepare a plan together. They hire a car or a taxi and stake out the places, where the girl stays. On the day of the planned kidnapping, they will drive the car to the place where they are sure to meet the girl. She will be dragged into the car and the kidnapper's friends will hold her seated while she cries and struggles. With squealing tires, the kidnappers bring the girl to a distant relative's or friend's house, preferably in another city or village. They will confiscate the girl's mobile phone so that she will be unable to contact her family or friends. If the girl's parents have an idea where to find her and get in touch with the kidnapper, the latter might tell the parents under what condition he would return the girl. Yet, as a rule, he will force the parents to agree to their daughter's marriage with him.

Officially bride kidnapping is forbidden by law. It is considered a crime in the contemporary code of law as was also the case under Soviet rule. In the Criminal Code of the Soviet Republic of Georgia (1960), a specific article was dedicated to it: "Kidnapping for the purpose of marriage" (§134), the kidnappers were sentenced with a prison sentence of at least three years. Since 2004, bride kidnapping is punished with prison sentences from two to ten years (Criminal Code of Georgia, §143) and falls under "illegal deprivation of liberty." Although non-governmental organizations, such as Amnesty International and the World Organization against Torture, pleaded to introduce specific laws for bride kidnapping, the Georgian legislature did not pass an explicit legal regulation against bride kidnapping.

About the Author

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In Tetrtskaro, the police registered eight kidnappings in 2009, but there was not a single trial at court. All of the eight reported incidents were finally withdrawn by the victim's family to avoid social stigmatization and disgrace. Suliko, a 23-year-old male, mentioned that victims of involuntary kidnapping do not report the case to the police, not just because of fears of public disgrace but also to avoid prison sentences. There is a high pressure put on the kidnapped girl and her family to marry the kidnapper. Suliko mentioned in the interview that his female friend Lika married her kidnapper, because the kidnapper begged her not to go to the police. If she makes a report he would go to prison and lose his social reputation. The kidnapper persuaded her to marry him and save him and his friends, who took part in the kidnapping, from punishment. Although she did like her kidnapper, she was not in love with him and not interested in marrying at that moment. Nevertheless she agreed to the marriage to avoid conflicts concerning her and her family's reputation.

Social disgrace, loss of reputation and the fear of rumors concerning the girl's physical integrity provide social pressure. Virginity is seen as the basis for marriage and once a girl has been kidnapped, there will rarely be a way to marry someone else.

Bride kidnapping is not just an "illegal deprivation of liberty," but also a predetermined deed by the kidnapper, who is aware of his action and the consequences. His action is well planned and he feels himself safe in a society where bride kidnapping is still considered a minor offense and seldom dealt with at court. Within the norms of the socially expected behavior for women, men take into account that the social norms will force the girl to marry him. They know about the social circumstances of rumors and the loss of a woman's reputation and its outcome.

Perceptions of gendered social and moral norms within the society of Tetrtskaro are considered stronger than the judicial authority. Therefore bride kidnapping is to a certain extent still viable.