

# Bride Stealers

**Ainura walked down the street on her way to the village store, her mind occupied with how to persuade her parents to allow her to go to the capital city to study.**

At 18 years old, she had finished school the previous summer, and had no desire to spend the rest of her life in the village, helping her mother run the house until her own marriage. And that marriage, she hoped, would not be for a long time yet!

As Ainura walked along, she became aware of a car driving slowly behind her. She idly wondered if the driver needed help finding an address and turned to see. Suddenly the car stopped and three men she didn't recognise jumped out and ran towards her. Ainura tried to escape but the men were too fast and too strong; they quickly overpowered her and forced her into the car. Ainura continued to struggle as they drove away – she knew the fate that awaited her at the destination: it would be the end of all her hopes and dreams. When the car pulled up outside a house, the youngest man's family was waiting – holding a headscarf. If they managed to put the headscarf on her head and secure it, then Ainura would be

considered married.

She cried and fought as they took her into the house but to no avail. The women gathered around her, all talking together about the time when they themselves were bride-napped; they tried to persuade her that she was getting a good husband and that it would be better for her if she just cooperated – after all, she really didn't have any choice. Only one hope remained for Ainura – that her family would come and save her – so she continued to struggle until well after dark. Eventually, though, she accepted that her family had chosen not to come, and that by continuing to refuse she would bring shame on them. She also knew that even if she could escape, her family would now refuse to let her return home.

As she permitted the headscarf to be placed on her, she mourned the loss of her dreams. There would be no study, no university: her future was now contained within these four walls. As wife to the youngest son, she would now be responsible for running the household under the authority of her mother-in-law. Dazed, she wondered how her life could have changed so much since she stepped out of her house just that morning...

Ainura's story is, sadly, all too common here in this part of Central Asia. Bride stealing (*Ala Kachuu* in the local language) is officially against the law, but has been increasing in the past few years, in both the cities and the villages.

One young believer was kidnapped recently on her way to her university class. A fellow student had jokingly declared he was going to marry her – except he turned out not to be joking. He arranged for his family's help to bride-nap her, and took her back to his village. She is now unable to finish her university study, and is separated from her like-minded friends and fellowship.

Interserve partners in the south of our country are on to their third language helper, having had both their previous language helpers bride-napped – *not* a usual language learning problem! Fortunately, not long ago their third helper was able to talk her way out of the same situation and return to her home, where, just as fortunately, her family received her back.

This is rare, as all too often the girl is powerless to do anything but accept the situation. If she runs away, she brings disgrace on her family and is often turned out with nowhere to go. The family see her as a traitor to them and to society, and may disown her completely.

Frequently, the bride-napping is done with the agreement of the girl's family, although the girl herself will know nothing about the plans that have been made on her behalf. In one such case, a young believer heard that she was about to be

stolen by a non-believing man. She told her family that she would not go along with it. For her own safety she then had to flee the country, as the family could well have killed her if she persisted in

refusing to marry the man.

The extent of bride-napping is not fully known but is probably great. In one village we visited, about 95% of the women said that they had “been stolen” and seemed to see it as a normal way of life. They all claimed to be happy, and for some this is probably true and the ‘napping’ possibly even happened with their consent. But for many the reverse is the case and they end up in abusive situations involving rape, beatings and other atrocities.

So why is bride-napping such a problem? Why do so many men resort to bride-napping as the means to get a wife? There *are* cases where it is done more out of tradition, and the girl will be involved in arranging it, along with her family. In these cases it is treated as a joke and part of the celebration. However, more often than not, the girl knows nothing about it, and sometimes does not even know the man involved.

Tradition demands that the youngest son marry so his bride can take on the running of the home and free up his mother to care for the grandchildren. Some men feel that the only guaranteed way to obtain the bride of their choice is to bride-nap her. Other men may be too poor to pay the expected dowry, which may be as much as five horses and other expensive gifts, to the girl’s family. Or – all too often – if the man is known to be involved in alcohol or drug abuse, no one is willing to marry

him, and so bride-napping is seen as the only option remaining for his family.

So, if *Ala Kachuu* is illegal, why is so little being done to stop it? There is a maximum prison sentence of two years for men who are successfully prosecuted; however, this does not seem to act as a deterrent. *Ala Kachuu* is often ignored by the authorities due to corruption and the view that bride-napping is a family problem, and as such the police prefer not to get involved. In the rare cases where they do take action and are successful in sending the man to prison, the marriage is not declared void. The wife then has to live with the shame not only of being bride-napped in the first place, but also of her husband’s imprisonment.

Ainura now lives happily with her husband and two children but she still thinks wistfully of what might have been, and makes plans for her daughter’s future, plans that include university and a good job. It’s the kind of future that, sadly, was stolen from Ainura, and is stolen from many women in this nation. Ainura’s hopes for her daughter *could* become reality – but only if the perpetrators of *Ala Kachuu* come to recognise that bride-napping is not a harmless cultural tradition, but rather a violation of women’s basic rights to dignity and free choice. ♪

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Men are expected to pay a dowry, which may include up to five horses.