

Ethical Dilemmas of Bride Kidnapping in Central Asia

CYNTHIA WERNER
TEXAS A&M U

In March of this year, PBS *Frontline* chose to air a 20-minute documentary entitled "The Kidnapped Bride," which highlighted an unusual marriage practice in Kyrgyzstan. Shortly before the program aired, the senior producer of the segment contacted me in his search for published information on the topic.

As an anthropologist who conducts research in neighboring Kazakhstan, I was initially excited to hear that a story about Central Asia would receive such attention. Having conducted extensive research on bride kidnapping, I was also apprehensive about how the media might represent such a complex practice and how this representation might further distort the outside world's understanding of Central Asia. While bride kidnapping has been covered occasionally in the international media and has been addressed by several international NGOs, it does not have anywhere near the notoriety as other patriarchal practices, such as female circumcision and honor killings.

The *Frontline* story effectively introduced this subject to a wider audience, and it did so in a very dramatic and sensational way. The story was captured by an odd pair: Petr Lom, a European philosopher with no previous experience in filmmaking and limited experience in Central Asia, and Fatima Sarbaev, a young cosmopolitan Kyrgyz woman who is married to an American instructor at American University—Central Asia.

Although the producers might have chosen to film interviews with kidnapped brides who could relay their experience (and perhaps anthropologists who could provide some context!), they instead chose to show footage of several kidnappings in progress while providing



A Kazakh bride introduced to the groom's relatives during the *betashar* ceremony, which marks the transition from bride to *kelin* (daughter-in-law). In kidnapping marriages, the *betashar* ceremony usually takes place the day after the kidnapping, while the more expensive wedding feast is delayed for several months. Photo by Cynthia Werner, 2001

minimal commentary. Much of the footage is very disturbing, including a scene where older women are strongly pressuring a reluctant bride to stay, and an interview with the father of a young woman who committed suicide after being kidnapped.

The subject of bride kidnapping and its representation in this particular film raise a number of ethical issues. Here, I respond to some of the issues raised by Joe Watkins in the previous issue of *Anthropology News*.

Responding to Kidnapping

In a published interview, Petr Lom explains the motivation behind the film as well as his own reservations about its content: "Deep down I think that filming some of the kidnappings was plain wrong. How do I justify my decision? I couldn't make the film otherwise, and I hope that in Kyrgyzstan—where I hope

that my film will be shown in every high school and university one day—the film will do a lot more good than any harm I might have done."

Setting aside the age-old question of whether Western societies should attempt to change practices in other societies, a number of anthropologists have raised ethical questions about Lom's decision to respond to bride kidnapping with this particular film: Is it ethical to film people participating in illegal acts? Did the filmmaker receive informed consent from all participants before filming? (In a style borrowed from investigative journalism, the film actually shows some people telling him to stop filming!) Is it possible that the film might be viewed as a glorification of kidnapping by locals and thus encourage further kidnappings? Should Lom have intervened to prevent the human rights violation inherent in the kidnappings he filmed?

Assuming that this film "does make a difference," even in a limited way, one has to wonder whether the means might justify the end in this case. I would argue, however, that a different film could have

been produced with the same impact yet fewer ethical violations from an anthropological perspective.



In response to the question about intervention, I think it is important to consider whether or not the young women portrayed in the film would be better off had Petr Lom intervened to prevent the kidnappings. Not necessarily!

From my research on bride kidnapping in Kazakhstan, I know that kidnapped women who "return home" are stigmatized within the community and they fear that they may not have another chance at marriage and the "normal" life that comes with it. Some women have told me that they also fear being harassed and even raped by the kidnapper and his friends if they were to pursue the case legally. More

COMMENTARY

research needs to be done on whether these fears are justified.

Although I disagree with the idea that Lom had an ethical obligation to intervene in the kidnappings he filmed, I do not think kidnapped brides should accept their fate as they are strongly advised to do by elders from both families. Rather, I think that the women should be the ones to make their own decisions based on their knowledge of the social situation. Kidnapped women do not have to accept the marriage, and in practice a small minority of kidnapped women do take this difficult option (as Lom shows in the film).

As a feminist anthropologist who has strong sympathy for the victims of this practice, I believe the best way to address this issue is to take steps that would make it easier for young women to reject undesirable kidnappings. This is not a simple task but might include public campaigns to denounce the practice and broader support systems for women who choose to reject a kidnapping. One of the reasons that young men continue to kidnap young women is that they are confident that they can get away with it.

Representing Kidnapping

I understand Petr Lom's desire to "do something" about bride kidnapping in Central Asia. Yet, at the same time, I am dissatisfied with

See *Ethical Dilemmas* on page 7

Commentary Policy

AN Commentaries are designed to explore diverse views of the discipline from an anthropological perspective. Commentaries reflect the views of the authors; their publication does not signify endorsement by AN or the AAA. Authors are expected to verify all factual information included in the text.

Problems with Advocacy

The central problem with advocacy is, without putting too fine a point on it, that the chances of positive outcomes for our subjects may actually *decrease* as an advocate's visibility *increases*. Academic networkers must cross various cultural chasms whose bridges are vulnerable, and many who regularly make those crossings in broad daylight are subject to fire that is often unfriendly. Leave those Guatemalan peasants long enough to speak at that Amnesty conference and return to find that local militias have rewarded them with an Almightly vacation.

So, there is an ontological (and crucial) paradox for the anthropologist-turned-advocate that cannot be overstated: anthropologists have made laying claim to being a part of the "outside" a prerequisite for membership in our professional collective. One's professional group membership becomes increasingly predicated, that is, on playing down one's group membership.

Remaining inside by convincing others that you are outside is a time-honored practice not only in anthropology but in contemporary life in general, which is why the "writing of passage" has become an academic

Call attention to the experiential pulp-pounding of every do-gooder who lives to become a household word and you simply empower more indolence among a general public already fatigued and depressed—until recently, that is—because today's systems of communication have made possible new relationships that transcend the mediating roles of many who once stood between indigenous peoples and outsiders.

New Ways of Relating

Today, our understanding of the degree to which anthropologists have functioned not only as "advocates," but as "gatekeepers" in their own right, is enhanced when we witness the results of employing new mechanisms that allow students to leapfrog over gates rather than pass through them; for it is not only corrupt local governments, politicians, warlords and scoundrels of all varieties who have distanced indigenous peoples from the outside world. Those same peoples have also been distanced by hierarchically-inclined anthropologists who have kept others out as much as invited them in—a fact which, of course, could not have been known

before the appearance of new ways of communicating that now already seem common.



Now even my undergraduates can communicate directly with indigenous peoples, alerting us to the rapid appearance of new kinds of relationships, and the need to understand what public impact those new relationships will have. These new ways of relating are not at all unproblematic, and they will certainly bring with them all sorts of ethical issues we cannot yet foresee. Will such forms of networking change the face of anthropology? Almost certainly. Though what will come of this welcome opportunity for involvement remains to be seen, it is clear even to casual observers of what we do that the future is a brighter one for those hoping to get involved than it may be for those who have already rubbed repeatedly against Milton's "famous" spurs. ☹

A David Napler is Senior Lecturer in medical anthropology at University College London and the author of The Righting of Passage (2004). He is the current Director of Students of Human Ecology, and, most recently, the designer of the Public Anthropology website's "Network for Student Activism."



that the chances of positive outcomes for advocate's visibility *increases*.

Ferry between presidential offices, major funders, fickle philanthropists, and the miseries of the oppressed and one will eventually (and surely) know disaster. Risk so much without putting on a good performance for the media at that same Amnesty conference and one not only endangers those left behind in the bush, but also fails to legitimate one's own agenda under the bright lights. Joan of Arc is our model here, as those who know history seem (to reshape a cliché) doomed to repeat it.

industry involving university departments, institutional overheads or grants for researchers who advocates and forms of self-promotion that border on the ludicrous. Like bohemian artists, "winners" in the advocacy race have always been those of us best positioned to convince others that we are not a part of the system, while at the same time dipping very deeply into institutional networks of authority. Everyone knows this to be happening before our eyes, but no one has said much about it because, without alternatives, doing so seems too damaging.

Ethical Dilemmas

Continued from page 5

the way the film represents and explains this practice. In a world where media representations of Central Asia are already narrowly focused on Islamic "fundamentalism," it is disturbing to see another issue presented without adequate explanation or contextualization.

The cases that Lom chooses to present in the film are truly horrifying, yet this only tells one part of the story. To begin, Lom's film does not explain how Kyrgyz marriage practices have changed in the Soviet and post-Soviet contexts.

The film also fails to capture the complexity of this practice, with its varying motives and varying levels of consent. Many women are kidnapped with their full consent as a way to reduce the costs associated with getting married or as a way to avoid their parent's wish to arrange a marriage to a less desirable man. Other women are kidnapped with

their "implicit" consent by men they know and like, and thus they accept the marriage.

Finally, the film does not discuss the difficulty of determining consent in a situation where consent can occur on multiple levels (bride, groom, bride's family, groom's family) and where women are culturally expected to express some resistance.

I do hope that this film brings greater awareness to the problem of *non-consensual* bride kidnapping in Central Asia. But, I hope that policymakers realize that Petr Lom's film does not represent the full complexity of this practice. ☹

Cynthia Werner is Assistant Professor of Anthropology at Texas A&M University. Her publications on bride kidnapping include: "Women, Marriage, and the Nation-State: The Rise of Nonconsensual Bride Kidnapping in Post-Soviet Kazakhstan" (Transformations of Central Asian States, 2004) and "The Rise of Non-Consensual Bride Kidnapping in Kazakhstan," (see the Woodrow Wilson Kennan Institute's website at <http://wwics.si.edu/index.cfm> to access this policy brief).