



## GRAB AND RUN



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## **Grab and Run**

Since Kyrgyzstan gained its Independence in 1991, there has been a revival of the ancient practice of Ala-Kachuu, which translates roughly as “grab and run.” More than half of Kyrgyz women are married after being kidnapped by the men who become their husbands. Some escape after violent ordeals, but most are persuaded to stay because of tradition and fear of scandal. Although the practice is said to have its roots in nomadic customs, the tradition remains at odds with modern Kyrgyzstan. Ala-Kachuu was outlawed during the Soviet era and remains illegal under the kyrgyz criminal code, but the law is rarely enforced and women are not protected from this violent practice.

## **About Kyrgyzstan**

Kyrgyzstan is a landlocked country located in Central Asia. It borders China in the south and the east, Kazakhstan in the north, and Uzbekistan and Tajikistan in the south and west. The capital of Kyrgyzstan is Bishkek, which is located in the central-northern part of the country. Much of Kyrgyzstan is mountainous.

The Kyrgyz people have a nomadic past. After Kyrgyzstan was conquered by Russia in 1876, many people began to live permanent settlements, however the country still retains a connection to its nomadic roots, and some people there still live a semi-nomadic lifestyle.<sup>1</sup>

In 1936 Kyrgyzstan became a republic of the USSR. Under Soviet rule, the country was known as Kirgiziya. Despite Kyrgyz resistance, Kyrgyzstan remained under Soviet rule until 1991, when it gained independence and took the name Kyrgyzstan.

The country’s total population is close to 6 million people.<sup>2</sup> About a million of these people live in Bishkek. However, the majority of the population lives in rural areas. Many farm the land and raise livestock. Close to 75 percent of the population in

Kyrgyzstan belongs to the Turkic ethnic group called Kyrgyz. The next most-common ethnic group is Uzbek, at about 15 percent, followed by approximately 5 percent Russian.<sup>3</sup> Kyrgyz is the country’s official language. The majority of the population is Muslim.

## **The Epic of Manas**

The Epic of Manas is a traditional epic poem that is an important part of Kyrgyz culture. Some people believe that it is the longest oral epic poem in the world. The Manas epic

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.discoverkyrgyzstan.org/>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/kg.html>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/kg.html>

has been publicly performed by singers—and passed down from performer to performer—for centuries. It is only in recent years that the poem has actually been written down. In the epic, the warrior Manas defeats enemy invaders and unites the Kyrgyz people, creating and defending a homeland for them. The poem is a trilogy, with the first part telling the story of Manas, part two focusing on his son Semetei, and the third part relating the life of his grandson Seitek.

Manas is celebrated as a national hero in Kyrgyzstan. There are numerous statues of him across the country, and parts of the Manas poem are publicly recited at festivals and public holidays. In 2013, the epic was included on the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization's (UNESCO) Intangible Cultural Heritage list.

### **Bride Kidnapping**

Bride kidnapping has been against the law in Kyrgyzstan since 1994. In 2013, new legislation increased penalties for this crime, from a maximum three-year prison sentence, to up to ten years.<sup>4</sup> However the practice is still common. According to the organization Girls Not Brides, almost 12,000 women and girls in Kyrgyzstan are kidnapped every year.<sup>5</sup> UN Women reports that one in five Kyrgyz marriages are the result of bride kidnapping.<sup>6</sup>

After they kidnap a bride, the kidnapper and his friends and family may use a number of different tactics to pressure her into staying. Often they force her to wear the ceremonial white marriage scarf on her head. According to tradition, acceptance of the scarf is a sign that the bride accepts the wedding. Kidnapped brides may also be pressured into writing a letter to their parents stating that they consent to the marriage, another traditional sign that they have accepted the wedding. Amnesty International reports that in many cases, girls and women are also raped after they are abducted, in order to pressure them into marriage. In Kyrgyz culture, it is a common belief that a girl or woman who is not a virgin is not marriageable.<sup>7</sup>

### **Negative Impacts of Kidnapping**

In 2018, a highly-publicized incident of bride kidnapping led to increased public scrutiny of the country's failure to take tough action against this practice. After Burulai Turdaaly Kyzy, a 20-year-old student was abducted for a second time, police left her and her kidnapper alone at the police station. The kidnapper then stabbed and killed her.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.unwomen.org/en/news/stories/2013/2/new-law-in-kyrgyzstan-toughens-penalties-for-bride-kidnapping>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.girlsnotbrides.org/where-does-it-happen/atlas/kyrgyzstan>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.unwomen.org/en/news/stories/2018/11/video-kyrgyzstan-kidnapped-brides>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2018/06/kyrgyzstan-new-rape-case-highlights-need-for-immediate-action-to-end-appalling-bride-kidnapping-practice/>

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.hrw.org/news/2018/05/31/young-womans-murder-kyrgyzstan-shows-cost-tradition>

While the majority of kidnappings do not end in death, there is widespread evidence that bride kidnapping can have many negative long-term effects. Human Rights Watch reports that violence and abuse are common for the victims of bride kidnapping.<sup>9</sup>

According to the Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE), this practice is also associated with higher rates of divorce, and because many of these marriages are not registered with state authorities, the divorced women may not receive any type of child support or other settlements. CSCE also reports that kidnapping can cause higher rates of suicide and depression.<sup>10</sup>



## Glossary

***beshike saluu***: A Kyrgyz tradition to celebrate when a baby is born.

***bilirubin***: Some babies become jaundiced when their blood contains a high level of bilirubin, a yellow substance which forms when red blood cells break down.

***Bonjigar***: An herbal tonic that is intended to improve liver problems.

***borsok***: A traditional fried bread.

***bread on the threshold***: In order to stop a kidnapped bride from escaping, some families put bread on the doorstep. Stepping over it is believed to bring bad luck.

***kuda tushuu***: An Kyrgyz wedding tradition, where the groom's family visits the bride's house

***kyz uzatuu***: A Kyrgyz wedding tradition of saying goodbye to the bride by holding a feast and preparing dowry.

***tushoo kesuu***: A Kyrgyz tradition to celebrate a baby's first steps.

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.hrw.org/news/2016/11/21/kyrgyzstan-ops-fight-against-child-marriage>

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.csce.gov/international-impact/bride-kidnapping-kyrgyz-republic>

## Additional Resources

### Books

- Armin Bauer, David Green, and Kathleen Kuehnast (1997). *Women and Gender Relations: The Kyrgyz Republic in Transition*. Manila, Philippines: Asian Development Bank.
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