

# Constructing post-Soviet identities: An analysis of representations of bride-kidnapping in Kyrgyz cinema

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The paper examines how contemporary Kyrgyz cinema supports and encourages images of bride kidnapping as an act of producing both ethnic and gender identities that fill the gap left by the sudden break-up of the Soviet Union. Focussing on the contribution of local popular media in shaping identity construction in this contested field, the paper uses in-depth film analysis of key scenes to show how repeated ritual practices around bride kidnapping establish identity and continuity. The analysis of cinematic representation of bride kidnapping will be based on the Kyrgyz feature film *Boz Salkyn* (2007) by Ernest Abdyzhaparov, one of the most popular directors of contemporary Kyrgyz cinema. This film is part of a larger body of recent Kyrgyz film productions dealing with the search for Kyrgyz identity by contrasting rural traditions and modern urban lifestyle. It is, however, the only Kyrgyz production featuring the practice of bride kidnapping as its main topic. The film analysis follows a two-folded approach. First, the development and transformation of the female protagonist through the kidnapping, as an idealised act of identity constitution, will be discussed. This is contrasted by elements of parody in the representation of minor characters and bystanders of the kidnapping, which question the authority of the main narrative.

**Keywords:** bride kidnapping; Kyrgyzstan; gender; identity construction; ethnicity; film

## Introduction

The practice of bride-kidnapping has long been a subject of imagination and a recurring motif in literature and media both during Soviet times and afterwards. In the Soviet context, it has been associated with the backwardness of some of the southern and eastern non-Slavic republics of the Soviet Union.<sup>1</sup> Representations evolved around the *topoi* of Russian orientalism. In the Post-Soviet context, the practice has received more and more attention from western media and triggered a socio-political discourse on women's rights in the region. As research suggests, in Kyrgyzstan itself, the prevalence of bride kidnappings has increased since independence and is justified through a recent wave of ethnic traditionalism. Through ethnographic and sociological research, the extent and frequency of bride kidnapping is well known, whereas the influence of local media and their representations of the practice remains widely unfamiliar to the

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western audience.

In this paper, the re-emergence of bride-kidnapping will therefore be analysed through the lens of cinematic representation in Post-Soviet Kyrgyzstan. The analysis will focus on the 2007 feature film *Boz Salkyn (Pure Coolness)* by the Kyrgyz director Ernest Abdzhabarov. Marriage through bride-kidnapping is the central theme of this coming-of-age film, around which the plot develops. The film was produced by the Kyrgyz production company *Oy Art* in association with the Kazakh company *Aldongar Productions* and received financial support from several western European film funds.<sup>2</sup> Although the film was highly popular in national cinemas, due to its international funding, it was also produced with an international audience in mind. As a result, it was showcased in several European film festivals and a nominee for two film awards.<sup>3</sup>

In the following, the paper will show how mechanisms of identity construction are, firstly, embodied in the female protagonist through the ritual practice of bride kidnapping, and secondly, how the parody in the subplots destabilizes the naturalized identity construction of the main plot. On the iconographic level this narrative construction is supported by the setting and framing of the picture. The setting underlines the dichotomy between urban and rural landscapes; between civilisation and nature; modernization and traditionalism; Soviet and post-Soviet life.

Previous research on the practice of bride-kidnapping, which has predominantly been based on ethnographic accounts and surveys, indicates a connection between the Kyrgyz independence and the rise in (non-)consensual bride kidnapping (Borbieva 2012; Kleinbach *et al.* 2005). However, Kleinbach *et al.* (2005, p. 198) also indicate that non-consensual bride-kidnapping has already started to rise during Soviet times, whereas “prior to the Soviet period non-consensual kidnapping was rare”. Yet, with no statistical data available for the Pre-Soviet period, the frequency of (non-)consensual kidnappings is hard to determine. The findings from various historical and ethnographic sources on the lifestyle and traditions of the Kyrgyz people presented in yet another paper by Kleinbach and Salimjanova suggest that non-consensual bride-kidnapping “was not an accepted tradition or custom” (2007, p. 230). All this said, it is puzzling that in a 2005 survey conducted among Kyrgyz women the majority of the respondents, when asked about the reasons for kidnapping a bride, stated that “it is a good traditional way to get a bride” (Kleinbach *et al.* 2005, p. 197).

In order to fully understand this line of argument, the paper will examine how bride-kidnapping is culturally marked as a Kyrgyz tradition and used in the daily practice of identity construction of ethnically Kyrgyz women. National identities establish not only an imagined community of blood relation and lineage among their members, but create a community through shared traditions, rituals and a certain habitus to separate themselves from the others and achieve social cohesion (Anderson 1991; Hobsbawm 1996). These traditions are naturalized and stabilized through regular repetition and re-enactment.

The paper will mainly be concerned with the construction of bride kidnapping as a symbolically charged practice of identity construction and its representation in contemporary film. The first section of the paper introduces the theoretical framework on identity construction and the role of the media therein. This will be followed by a short overview of cinema in Kyrgyzstan, preceding the main part of the article, the analysis of the 2007 feature film *Boz Salkyn*. Firstly, the focus will be put on the main character and her transformation through the kidnapping. Secondly, the bystanders approach

will be applied in order to analysis the role of other characters, who are more or less directly involved in the kidnapping. The paper concludes with some remarks on the main findings of the analysis, limitations and suggestions for further research.

### **National and gender identity as performative categories**

This section takes a look at the gendered nature of national identity with special regard to the Soviet case in Central Asia. Identity will be discussed as a concept of historical contingency that is established and consolidated through repeated practices within a social group, rather than being an unchanging constant. National and gender identities are “social temporalities” even though, once established they appear to be both natural and unchangeable (Butler 1997). The focus here will be not so much on policies of nation-building and the state, but on the construction of identity as a practice of community building through performance (ritual of bride-kidnapping) and/in the performing arts (film). A short overview of the historical development in Central Asia will set the stage for embedding the theoretical considerations in their respective socio-cultural context.

Prior to Soviet rule the people living in the territory of present-day Kyrgyzstan would primarily identify themselves with their clan or tribe, rather than with their ethnic group (Pipes 1997; Smith 1990). Thus, they also lack a history of national liberation.<sup>4</sup> From the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century the Russian Empire ruled over the territory of Central Asia, but only with the establishment of the Soviet Union a comprehensive programme of modernisation was initiated. Soviet modernisation of Central Asia included: urbanisation and forced sedentism of pastoralist groups, industrialisation of the mainly agrarian economy and compulsory and free education for all citizens, including women. These were supplemented by other measures of the nationality policy such as the territorialisation of ethnicity, through which the five republics of present-day Central Asia have been created between 1924 and 1936.<sup>5</sup> Within the newly created territories social cohesion of nationalities within their respective territories was encouraged through a system of bonuses and advantages for the respective titular nationality. This system of affirmative action only worked for the groups entitled as nations, whereas separatist movements and minority issues were repressed (Zaslavsky 1992). In the beginning, the Soviets also encouraged the standardisation of national languages and the development of national literatures. In the case of Kyrgyzstan the literary culture of which had previously been based on oral tradition such as the *Manas* epos, the development of literature and national cinema went almost hand in hand (Bulgakova 1999, p. 165). Hence, among the first important film productions and those that gained attention beyond the republic, are primarily adaptations of Kyrgyz national literature whose main representative at the time was (and still is) Chingiz Aitmatov (Bulgakova 1999, p. 166; Dallet 1992, p. 309).

All of these actions were aimed at creating an indivisible union among the people as one nation. However, nation as a seemingly unifying concept that transcends all differences, including gender, turned out to be highly gender-sensitive, as women’s roles were especially targeted in the Soviet nationalities policies in Central Asia (Hayward 2000; Massell 1974; Northrop 2004). The patriarchal family seemed to be particularly resilient in the Muslim republics of Central Asia. Thus, Soviet policies were aimed at ruling out not only Islamic practices such as the veiling of women, but all other “crimes based on custom” traditions (Massell 1974, p. 202). These traditions, banned in 1928

by the law “On Crimes Constituting the Relics of the Tribal Order”, centred primarily around rituals concerning marriage and family life (Massell 1974, p. 206). As such the vast majority of those crimes were gendered. The kidnapping of a bride fell under these new laws as well as the payment of *kalym* (brideprice), early marriage, polygamy and levirate (practice of a widow marrying her brother-in-law). The Soviet policies towards women, however, were no less ambiguous and paradox than towards the nationalities question. As Douglas Northrop (2004, pp. 46-58) has lucidly shown, these customs were both employed as signifiers of ethnic distinction in the national delimitation policies, while at the same time used to highlight the backwardness of these ethnic groups.

These contradictory strategies are still relevant when looking at identity construction in Kyrgyzstan today. The same ritual practices evolving around gender-sensitive issues and targeted through the Soviet nationalities policies are still prevalent or have even increased since independence. National identity, as any other identity, is a social construction established through repeated practice. Identity construction is “a stylized repetition of acts” (Butler 1997, p. 402). It is enacted in rituals, in films and other cultural artefacts, which are considered direct expressions of the cultural tradition of a nation. But through this performativity they also serve as agents of change, as in the performance the possibility of deviation is always included (Hayward 2000, p. 99). Both the ritual itself as well as its representation in film allow for the co-existence of unity and difference. Both the unifying and destabilizing effects are at work in the film *Boz Salkyn*.

The performance of the bride kidnapping in the film generally follows the theory of the *rites of passage* as described by van Gennep and further developed by Turner, which assumes three phases of the ritual process: the phase of separation, the liminal phase and the phase of aggregation or reincorporation (Turner 1989, p. 94; Van Gennep 1986, p. 21). There are, however, also certain turning points in the ritual process, where the successful performance is at stake and already a slight deviation from the prescribed ritual process could lead to a failed passage or transition. This is why the performance of the ritual is guided by strict rules and marked by high social regulations. Engagement and marriage are among the most important *rites of passage*, because of their significance for the various social groups involved, such as the family, the village community and gender groups. Within societies organised in kinship groups as in Kyrgyzstan, marriage means the loss of one family member for one kinship group, whereas the other family gains new member. In the bride-kidnapping in this film, the focus is on the larger community, while the individual relationship of the couple is clearly of secondary importance. However, the *rite of passage* is not only of special significance for the social group but also for the individual, which emerges as changed from the experience of the ritual. Bride kidnapping expresses both a change of status and a change of the group membership (Van Gennep 1986, p. 121). In the ritual of bride-kidnapping a distinctive community is created and re-enacted. It assigns very specific roles to both men and women and establishes a tradition and belonging to a certain group, namely that of other women who were also kidnapped and the bigger community of Kyrgyz people, who traditionally perform this kind of marriage ritual.

The performance of ritual that is at the heart of the analysis is repeated in the performativity of the medium film it is presented in. The shooting of the film is a performative act that is not itself repeated, but in showings of the film the performance can be

(re-)presented and revived. As films are repeatedly shown and viewed, local discourses and practices evolve around them and embed them into a social context, where they develop stabilizing or destabilizing effects, just as any other performative practice.

### **The national cinema of Kyrgyzstan**

The 2007 feature film *Boz Salkyn* is only one of the various examples of contemporary Kyrgyz cinema dealing with the social tensions of the post-Soviet transition period. The Kyrgyz film industry has always been among the smallest of Central Asian and Soviet national cinemas and has only slightly increased since independence.<sup>6</sup> All important national film-makers engage with contemporary social and political conflicts, the economic downturn, deterioration of living standards or the eclectic mixture of modern and traditional lifestyle characteristic of Kyrgyzstan. In comparison to other Central Asian national cinemas the “Kyrgyz filmmakers were the most effective and consistent in understanding and portraying the image of their national world” (Abikeeva 2003). This engagement with national identity and culture of film has a long tradition in Kyrgyz film history and has its roots in the specific circumstances under which the Kyrgyz cinema developed.

The history of Kyrgyz film production started with the evacuation of the Moscow film studios to Central Asia during the Second World War. After the war was over, the staff returned to Moscow, but left the equipment behind, which thereafter served as a starting point for the development of an independent Kyrgyz cinematography and leading to the Kyrgyz ‘wonder’ years in the 1960s (Cummings 2009; Radvanyi 1991). The potential of cinema for promoting both national and Soviet identities was soon discovered (Aitmatov 1979). A frequently reoccurring motif in these early films is the representation of the nation’s development and women’s liberation through a female protagonist.<sup>7</sup> The women of Central Asia served as a very powerful example of a previously doubly oppressed minority – both as a nation and as women – that were liberated by socialism (Bulgakova 1999, p. 165). In later years however, as more and more native directors emerged, the national cinemas of the Soviet Union developed an increasingly critical standpoint towards the loss of tradition and Sovietisation (Dallet 1992, p. 303).

In recent productions the concern with national identity in times of social and cultural change remains strong as the following examples illustrate. The 2010 film *Svet-Ake* (The Light Thief) by Aktan Arym Kubat features the brave electrician, who illegally provides electricity even to households in his village that can no longer pay their bill. He dreams of building a wind park, but when a foreign investor is willing to provide financial support in exchange for participation in decision-making on village affairs, he withdraws. A more humoristic approach to portraying contemporary life in Kyrgyzstan is Ernest Abdyzhaparov’s 2004 comedy *Saratan*, which depicts post-Soviet village life in burlesque episodes as they are reported to the village chief. The former representative of stately law and order is, however, unable to fulfil their demands and requests in this time of political instability. In his second feature film *Boz Salkyn*, Abdyzhaparov keeps the somewhat humoristic tone of his first release and returns to the tradition of employing a female protagonist to embody the contradictions of an imagined all-inclusive and undivided national identity and its actual disruption between tradition and modernity.

## ***Boz Salkyn***

The film *Boz Salkyn* uses humoristic moments to sharply contrast the disturbing images of bride kidnapping. The plot centres on a young woman from the city, Asema, who introduces her boyfriend Murat to her parents. He intends to take her to his village and meet his family before the couple plans to get married later in the year. Upon their arrival in the village, however, Asema learns that Murat's previous girlfriend is still interested in him. When Asema finds the two of them together at a party she immediately attempts to return to the city. Unfortunately, the car that she asks to take her back was waiting for another girl, Anara, to be kidnapped and married to a boy from the village, Sagyn. Instead, now Asema is being kidnapped. After her initial resistance to the kidnapping, she finally gives in to marry a stranger – mostly out of desperation and disappointment about Murat's betrayal. Once she follows her new husband into the mountains, where they live in the most remote area, she slowly makes peace with her fate and initiates a relationship with her husband.

Besides running in different international film competitions and several viewings on film festivals, including its premiere at the film festival in Cannes, the film also proved to be very popular in Kyrgyzstan (Abikeeva 2009). Articles and reviews about the film repeatedly worked with anecdotes and myth-creation in order to underline its popularity. For instance, the director claims in an interview that the number of newly born girls with the name of the main character has sharply risen since the release of his film in Kyrgyzstan (*Bride Kidnapping in Kyrgyzstan* 2012). One review uses the fact that there were already illegal DVD copies available on local bazars prior to the film's official release to support the claim of its overwhelming popularity (Moldaliev 2008). Clearly, these anecdotes are not to be taken as simple facts, but merely as indicators of the authors' intention to highlight the special position of the film among other film releases. These examples provide a rough approximation of where the film stands in the national awareness. There is no official data of viewing figures available from Kyrgyzstan and combined with a high prevalence of illegal copying it is difficult to even estimate numbers. According to Abikeeva (2009, p. 187), however, presumably every second Kyrgyz has seen *Boz Salkyn*. We can therefore assume its relevance in the question on the role of media in identity construction in Kyrgyzstan. With this information in the background, the following section aims at an in-depth analysis of selected key scenes of the film to examine those mechanisms on the narrative and iconographic level.

### **In Focus: the main character's transformation through the kidnapping**

The centre of the film both in form and content is the transformation of the female protagonist Asema through the kidnapping. It will be shown how traditional Kyrgyz identity represented in the film is a gendered one, which is embodied and re-enacted in the character of Asema as well as in certain other female characters. Three stages in Asema's development can be distinguished as she moves from the city into the village until she finds herself at her final destination – the remote mountain pastures. These stages on the narrative level correspond with the change of setting on the iconic level and will be analysed in the framework of the *rites of passage*.

### ***The exposition: before the kidnapping***

Only two sequences of the narrative take place in an urban setting, represented by a

typical Soviet-style apartment. This setting sharply contrasts with rural landscapes and outdoor shots that dominate the rest of the film. One of these scenes is the opening sequence, which already contains all these potential conflicts of the film in the conversation between Asema and her parents. Primarily, the scene depicts a conflict between two generations, namely that of the parents, who grew up in the Soviet period, and Asema, who was brought up in independent post-Soviet Kyrgyzstan. Asema grew up in an urban environment, her parents, however, originate from peasant families and only later in life moved to the city. As it turns out during the conversation, today they are filled with contempt for the presumed backwardness of village life, where people engage in “certain Kyrgyz village customs”, that implies bride kidnapping (Boz Salkyn 2007, TC: 00:05:19).

The parents represent a generation of Soviet-raised and -educated Kyrgyz, who profited from the modernising efforts of the Soviet government. The children, on the other hand, were brought up in the early post-Soviet turmoil and are opposed to the parents’ positive image of good jobs and urban life. Asema is bored by her bank job and wants to follow her boyfriend Murat to his village. Murat vividly evokes a picture of the Kyrgyz nature in his speech and his language is filled with symbols expressing a longing for the authentic Kyrgyz way of life in the village and mountains, unspoiled by modern life and capitalist institutions.

The generational gap is marked by the object of their longing and their goals in life. The parents, on the one hand, longed to escape the village and to settle in a modern apartment in a city. The new generation, on the other hand, turns back to village life and the Kyrgyz mountainous landscape as a projection of their longing. This is not only a spatial shift from the city back to the village, it also carries the implicit meaning of a travel back in time to an unspoiled past, to the origins of Kyrgyz culture and lifestyle, which seem to have gotten lost in the Soviet period.

In this first scene, Asema is presented as a very strong minded young woman, who is not afraid of confrontation with her parents. She clearly dominates the conversation, challenges her father about his peasant past and, in the end, she pulls Murat away, before he can say goodbye to his future in-laws. On the one hand, her behaviour and way of dressing introduce her as a modern woman. On the other hand, the dissatisfaction with her life and the life her parents want for her already marks a break from her old family and initiates the first step of transition. She is distancing and separating herself from her old environment. With leaving the city the *rite of passage* really begins. In the course of the narrative Asema will move spatially from the city to untouched nature. In addition to that, she will change her social status from an unmarried woman to a wife, which includes a change of kinship group as well.

### ***The passage: Bride kidnapping and the veil***

Leaving the parents and city life behind, the film enters the village in the following sequence. Even though the major part of the plot is set in a rural environment, it represents only a transitional stage towards the ultimate retreat from modern life and civilisation in the mountains. For Asema, the village is the liminal space between being a young unmarried girl and becoming a wife. In contrast to the urban environment, in the village many important scenes are shot outside and include scenery and national symbols of Kyrgyz landscape, such as Lake Issyk-Kul and the mountain ranges of the Tian Shan. Besides the change in scenery the most important changes are illustrated

through Asema's transition in the context of her kidnapping and marriage. The phrase "[W]e also got married this way" (Boz Salkyn 2007) is reiterated three times in the course of the narrative. Each time, it is uttered by an anonymous voice from a crowd of women, who surround Asema and try to persuade her into marriage. Noticeably, the sentence is always expressed in a larger group, never in confidential dialogue, which makes it appear as if the women speak with one voice. It does not seem to be intended for Asema to verbally respond to the requests of the women. Consent is shown through the act of accepting the white bridal veil. This kind of communication can be found throughout the narrative. Speech is not the primary means of communication; more often acts are expected instead. If there is speech, it is often in formalized and ritualized sentences, from which no real dialogue ensues, like in this situation.

The first time the phrase "[w]e also got married this way" (Boz Salkyn 2007, TC: 00:16:55) is uttered in the house of Murat's parents, as his mother and aunts want Asema to put on the traditional white bridal veil. She repeatedly takes it off again until she is saved by Murat, who angrily pulls her away. The second and third time we hear the phrase immediately after Asema's kidnapping. The kidnapers arrive with Asema at the groom's house. Here, the women of the family are taking over and rush Asema into an especially prepared room. Asema, having realized what is happening to her, fights the women trying to put the white bridal veil on her head, while repeating several times that they have kidnapped the wrong one. But no one seems to listen to her. Instead, they reassure her again: "All of us got married this way." (Boz Salkyn 2007, TC: 00:38: 31)

One of the main objectives of this assurance is to create a kind of bond between Asema, the strange young woman from the city, and the women from the village. They intend to establish a community of place and continuity in time between themselves, Asema and all the other women who have married or will be married through kidnapping in the future. This collective atmosphere is highlighted by the anonymous way of speaking as a crowd, which assigns the sentence to none of the women individually, but awards it to all of them together.

Traditions, through ritualized practice, create a bond and community in the present by creating a shared past, to which the present is closely related through these same unchanged practices and upon which the future depends as well. One of the women says to Asema: "If you don't marry now, you will never be happy." (Boz Salkyn 2007, TC: 00:38:40) Through this, she implies that fate is inevitable. The present creates the future or in the words of the villagers – her fate. Marrying now will not only connect her to a shared past and integrate her into the present group of married-by-kidnapping women, but also determine her position and social status in the future. As a married woman she has a significantly higher social status than as an unmarried woman. Through childbirth, especially of a boy, her social status will further rise (Krader 1963). When analysing the kidnapping and the procedures in the groom's house through the model of *rites of passage* as described in the theories of van Gennep (1986) and Victor Turner (1989), the social function of this performance becomes clear. In the first phase, the phase of separation, which is characterized by the act of kidnapping, Asema is radically uprooted from her previous environment and transferred to a state of transition (liminality). On the one hand, she is no longer part of her former social group, which is why her parents have no impact on preventing or approving the wedding.

They are only notified of their daughter's marriage after she has already departed to the mountains with her husband. On the other hand, however, Asema has not yet taken up a new role. She has no rank and no possessions. She is in a state of ambiguity (Turner 1989). The liminal phase is further illustrated by Asema's spatial separation. She is located with the other women (and only women) in a separate part of the room and prevented from view by a curtain. After Asema has accepted the wedding, rituals of reincorporation, which are divided into individual and collective rituals, mark the third and final phase of the ritual process. (Van Gennep 1986, p. 129) Collective rituals of reincorporation are aimed at creating bonds with the kinship group, the village community and with the group of married women. The inclusion of Asema in the new collective of the village and the kinship group is mainly the task of the women. After the act of kidnapping the men disappear and leave the further performance of rituals to the women of the family.

Individual rituals of reincorporation, on the other hand, are to create bonds between the bride and groom. The following section will elaborate on the way the couple starts to approach each other once they have reached the remote mountain pastures, incorporating the scenic setting of the Kyrgyz Mountains amongst other national symbols.

### ***The reincorporation: Embodying the nation***

After Asema's kidnapping and marriage to Sagyn, the newly-weds leave for the mountain camp, where they herd their sheep during summer. There are no roads leading to the site of the yurt of Sagyn's family. Upon their arrival, Asema leaves the car to appreciate the impressive landscape around her. Her mother-in-law joins and explains the meaning of the land to her family:

You see, my daughter, every stone, every blade of grass, even the water is blessed. This is the land of Sagyn's ancestors. [...] Now it's your land, too. If you treat it with respect, it will protect you. (Boz Salkyn 2007, TC: 00:51:45)

She evokes a continuous line of ancestors who are connected to the land and places Asema amongst them. Through formal ritualized speech Asema becomes part of a group that is deeply connected to their land.

The mountainous camp site is the main setting for the last third of the film and includes many panorama shots of the surrounding nature. The images are filled with scenic motifs of mountain ranges in dusk accompanied by a musical theme. These shots in their picturesque depiction of mountains evoke the idea of a home land and a belonging to this particular territory. In addition to that, they also remind the viewer of the pastoral past of the Kyrgyz people through the use of the panorama shot. Asema is shown to find joy in the untouched nature as she is dancing down the hills. Besides the mountain pastures, other national symbols are employed to support the narrative that connects Asema's transformation with a symbolically charged Kyrgyz identity.

One of the most compelling examples of Asema's symbolic embodiment of the nation is the imagery of her in a national costume, which was given to her by her mother-in-law upon leaving the village. These clothes and jewellery are part of the family's heirloom as she explains to Asema:

My dear daughter, anything can happen in this life. But if you accept your destiny it will protect and reward you. These belonged to Sagyn's ancestors. Our heirlooms. They must be several hundred years old. My mother-in-law gave them to me, when I first came here. If God so will, you'll pass them on to your daughter-in-law. (Boz Salkyn 2007, TC: 00:45:44)

The gifts are part of the collective rites of integration into the new family. This is again highlighted by the formal way of speaking. These clothes come to bear an important meaning not only for the family but also for the individual reincorporation of Asema into her new life. After some time in the mountains, she puts on the costume and jewellery to greet her returning husband in the evening. This scene marks a turning point in the relationship of the couple and expresses Asema's consent and acceptance of her new identity. The dress symbolizes the completion of her transition. Before, Asema has been strictly passive in the whole process since the bride kidnapping. Therefore, by deliberately choosing to wear these clothes she actively chooses to accept her new family and husband. Had they previously been very reserved towards each other, they now talk for the first time and Sagyn plays a love song for Asema on the national instrument, the *komuz* that night. The strong image of Asema in the traditional Kyrgyz costume against the backdrop of the yurt is the key symbol that links her individual and social passage to the overall narrative of assuming an ethnic identity through repeated ritualized practice involving national symbols of the Kyrgyz people.

In summary, Asema's transition goes hand in hand with the retreat from civilisation. The kidnapping is followed by several other rites of reincorporation, through which she is taught the cultural heritage and habitus of the Kyrgyz women by the older women of the village, especially her mother-in-law. The role of the mother-in-law and other (female) bystanders in the kidnapping will be examined further in the following section.

### **In Focus: The role of bystanders in the kidnapping**

In the previous section, the focus has been on the representation of the main character Asema and her development with regard to the ritualised performance and embodiment of identity. This section analyses a few scenes where the focus shifts from Asema to the bridegroom, Sagyn, his mother and the role of other friends and family members in the kidnapping. As discussed above, the major part of the plot is devoted to the depiction of the main character's transformation through the kidnapping and the performative act of assuming a new identity and role. There are, however, also a few scenes that play an important role in the understanding of the narrative, where Asema is not present. Bystanders of the kidnapers take the scene and engage in seemingly insignificant conversations and actions. While the main narrative of the film shows identity construction as a rule-based process of integration and naturalisation through ritual practise and performative acts, the following scenes subvert this dominant or preferred reading (Hall 1980, p. 134). Identity as a rule-governed practise does not only have limiting effects through its conventions, but always enable "the assertion of alternative domains of cultural intelligibility" (Butler 2006, p. 198). Butler (2006, p. 200) further elaborates that "[P]ractises of parody can serve to reengage and reconsolidate the very distinction between a privileged and naturalized gender configuration and one that appears as derived, phantasmatic and mimetic – a failed copy". In this film, elements of comedy and parody subvert the preferred reading of a naturalized national identity reproduced and embodied in the female protagonist.

The following analysis will therefore look at the kidnapping from a different angle emphasizing particularly the leading role of the groom's mother in the kidnapping. This will give the previously shown importance of other women in the process of integrating the new wife into the community a new notion. Moreover, the sequence will question wide-spread assumptions about traditional gender roles, dominance of men and the suppression of women, especially with regard to bride kidnappings. Finally, this reading or viewing points to an under-researched aspect in research or socio-political discourse on combatting the practise of bride kidnapping. Most research focuses on either the situation of the women who are kidnapped or, less often, on the rationale of the men for kidnapping (Handrahan 2004; Kleinbach *et al.* 2005). Also, the orientalisering representations of bride kidnapping, mainly by Western media, depict the practise as a binary opposition of male violence against helpless women (*Bride Kidnapping in Kyrgyzstan* 2012; *The stolen brides of Kirgizstan* 1996). This simplifying model is challenged by the analysis of the following scenes showing the heavy involvement of women in the planning and execution of the bride kidnapping.

### ***Preparing the bride kidnapping***

The sequence, in which Sagyn's mother explains the plan to kidnap an orphaned girl from the village, is one of the key scenes of the film. Furthermore, the sequence is particularly relevant in view of gender relations and offers an alternative take on the bride kidnapping beyond the juxtaposition of male perpetrators and female victims.

Sagyn, his mother and other relatives are sitting around a table and drinking tea. Sagyn's mother explains that she cannot accompany her son to the mountain pastures this year, which is why Sagyn has to get married that night, before their departure. The orphaned girl Anara was chosen as the bride and since efforts to come to an agreement on the marriage have failed, Kapar, Sagyn's friend, has organized a party for the expressed purpose to lure Anara there and kidnap her. The majority of the planning, however, is done by the women. Two women, Sagyn's mother and a woman seated across from her, are dominating the conversation and giving instructions to the men at the table. Their active participation and even leadership in the bride kidnapping must have an at least surprising effect on the viewer. It contradicts the common belief according to which bride kidnappings are classified as acts of violence planned and carried out by men, while women are innocent and helpless victims of male aggression.

Contrary to public opinion and media presentation, it is often the groom's mother, who decides about the wedding as well as the mode, e.g. arrangement or kidnapping and actively participates in the planning and execution. All of this is explicitly shown in the film, with the planning scene being central to the understanding of the leadership role of the groom's mother. In her speech, she clearly states when, whom and how her son is to marry:

I can't go to the mountain pastures this year. That's why Sagyn must get married, tonight. The girl's name is Anara. An orphan. She's been brought up by her aunt. We can't take any risks. She must be stolen. (Boz Salkyn 2007, TC: 00:23:49)

She is supported by the woman seated across from her, who adds, looking at Kapar: "Just make sure, she is there. Leave the rest to us." (Boz Salkyn 2007, TC: 00:24:35) It is clearly understood that women take the lead in this plan, while the men would only help in its implementation. The men in this scene subordinate themselves to the

women. They speak only when called upon by the two women. Then they hastily assure that everything is well prepared for the evening. Only as the women insist, they rise from the table in order to prepare the car. The situation is not without comedy, which derives in particular from Sagyn's father, who quickly reassures his wife as to not incur her wrath. Her suspicion is prophetic as the men indeed kidnap the wrong girl.

Sagyn, who is, in fact, one of the main figures in the planned kidnapping, does not speak a single word during the whole scene. He does not even look into the eyes of the people, who are deciding about his future. All the while he keeps his eyes lowered shyly, seemingly preoccupied with his cup of tea. The whole affair seems to not concern him. The decision about his marriage is made exclusively by his mother. This impression is reinforced by his two encounters with Anara, his bride-to-be.

In their first scene together, Sagyn makes a call at her house, where the two do not speak a single word with each other. The awkward silence is highlighted by the absence of any music or soundtrack to accompany the scene. In their second scene together, Sagyn accompanies Anara towards the supposedly waiting car after the party. In the last minute before the kidnapping, he suggests that they should marry. Asked for his reasons by Anara, he replies: "No reason." (Boz Salkyn 2007, TC: 00:37:51)

Neither the classification of bride kidnapping as violence by men against women nor simplistic categorising of gender roles can be maintained upon closer inspection and analysis of those scenes. Rather, the practice has to be embedded in an approach including various social agents such as the mother of the bridegroom.

In this scene as well as in others, comedy is employed as a stylistic device to allow for alternative perspectives on the kidnapping and hence subvert the main plots dominant reading. Comedy and parody are never employed in the context of the romantic love story of Asema in the main story line though, but only in subplots or among secondary characters. The general motives of the film dealing with the social implications of the post-Soviet transformation at first glance seem quite obvious and even banal with their idealisation of the past and the "back-to-nature" motif. Nevertheless, the film succeeds in capturing the ambiguity and hybridity of the situation of a society in transformation in the narrative.

## **Conclusion**

The constitution of both gender and ethnic identity appears to be a personal matter at first glimpse that is, in fact, always negotiated in social acts. These social acts take the character of a performance and as they are repeated over time into what is called a ritual or tradition. The primary characteristic of a tradition or ritual is that it historicizes a social act and connects the past with the present projecting into the future of a group. Rituals and traditions, such as bride kidnapping, help establish and maintain social groups and communities such as gender groups or ethnic groups, through the promotion of a sense of belonging and interconnectedness.

The theory on the performativity of identities has been used for the context of this paper to reveal mechanisms of identity construction in Kyrgyzstan through the representation of the ritual of bride kidnapping in the film *Boz Salkyn*. It has been shown how a *rite of passage*, the bride kidnapping, serves as a naturalizing and integrating social practice in establishing identities. Furthermore, the analysis revealed the strong linkage of gender and ethnic identity through the female protagonist. The banal ideali-

sation of gender and ethnicity as they are linked to motifs of nature and origin is countered by the destabilizing power of the subplots. Here women are shown actively plotting the forced kidnapping and marriage of another woman, while the men are presented as mindless string puppets, following female orders. Parody mitigates this alternative reading, which at least questions the main narratives authority. Nonetheless, cultural analysis of the main plot's construction helps understand the fundamental cultural mechanisms that define the status of bride kidnapping in a culture, so that effective measures to combat not only the symptoms but also the origins of the practice can be developed. Another aspect that calls for further research is the demonstrated involvement of other women in the kidnapping of brides in Kyrgyzstan – first and foremost that is the bride's future mother-in-law. All this said, this paper should be seen as an initiative contribution in investigating how media representation of bride kidnapping shapes identities in Kyrgyzstan.

### **Acknowledgements**

I would like to thank the researchers and reviewers at the University of Graz, in particular the editor of this volume Prof. Thomas Krüssmann, for their comments on this paper as well as for their ongoing effort and support in making this project happen.

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<sup>1</sup> For cinematic representations of these orientalisng strategies, see for example the 1967 Soviet comedy *Kavkazskaja plennica, ili novye priklyuchenija Shurika* (Kidnapping, Caucasian style)

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- <sup>2</sup> The Goteburg Film Fund, The Hubert Bals Fund of the Rotterdam Festival and Visions Sud Est.
- <sup>33</sup> Award nominations: 2007: for the Grand Prize of the Cottbus Film festival of young East European Cinema; 2008: for the Nika Award as Best Film from CIS and Baltics.
- <sup>4</sup> Other states in the region of the FSU are drawing on a national movement prior to Soviet occupation in order to justify their present day nationhood, such as Georgia or the Baltic states.
- <sup>5</sup> Between 1918 and 1924 the territory comprising today's Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan was united in the Turkestan Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic (Turkestan ASSR). As part of the national delimitation between 1924 and 1936 the Turkestan ASSR was divided in several steps into the territories as they are known today. The territory of today's Kyrgyzstan experienced multiple changes of name and status until in 1936 the Kirgiz SSR was established.
- <sup>6</sup> In 1989 Kyrgyz, Tajik and Turkmen studios all produced 4 feature films, while Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan produced 10-14. Today the yearly production of feature length films is approximately 10. See Radvanyi, J. ed. 1991. *Le cinéma d'Asie centrale soviétique*. Paris: Centre George Pompidou.
- <sup>7</sup> See for a very compelling example from Kyrgyzstan *Pervyj Uchitel'* (1965). Other earlier examples include *Sevil* (1929)