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Everyday Violence, Quotidian Grievs: Kidnapping in the Pankisi Gorge

Rebecca Gould



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in Muslim Contexts

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عَوَائِدُ زِيَارَتِ مُسْلِمِ قَوَائِدِ

Women Living Under Muslim Laws

النساء في ظل قوانين المسلمين

Femmes sous lois musulmanes

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Everyday Violence, Quotidian Grief: Patriarchal Bargains in Georgia's Pankisi Gorge

Rebecca Gould¹

Abstract

Bridal kidnapping is practiced in various parts of the world, including the Caucasus, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, parts of Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan. The practice seems to be increasing since the fall of the Soviet Union – most likely due to economic hardship and the resurgence of conservative identity politics. Gould focuses on a region of Georgia inhabited by a Chechen-speaking Muslim community. While local activists dispute that bride kidnapping stems from Chechen tradition and denounce the impunity enjoyed by perpetrators, Gould concentrates on one female subject to explore issues of consent and agency in a context marked by rigid norms with respect to marriage and female sexual desire. Her interviewee, Kato, defines motherhood and childrearing as central to women's identity and as the only path to achieve 'happiness', perhaps reflecting her own lack of option. Gould's analysis emphasizes 'patriarchal bargains' which she argues make self-assertion possible under conditions that would otherwise foreclose women's agency. Yet this testimony also highlights women's role in upholding cultural values that perpetuate patriarchal notions – e.g. portraying 'knowing one's place' as the way to gain 'respect'. It also points at the paradox of women's consensual assent to everyday violence against women, particularly in contexts where culture is perceived as threatened.

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I had arrived in the Pankisi Gorge to study the ways and language of the Kists. Numbering seven thousand, the Kists are a small ethnic group who inhabit the area. They belong to the *Vainakh* (literally “our people”), a group that includes the Muslim Chechen and Ingush and the Christian Tsova-Tush (Batsbi).² My first stop on my journey to the gorge was the home of Kato Gumashvili’s husband Suleiman, Joqolo’s most famous resident, a prolific writer, translator, politician, and former wrestler.³ I had first been driven to Pankisi because of Suleiman’s fame. He was known to the Kists as a poet—the only Kist to publish in Georgian as well as Chechen—, as a teacher of Chechen at the university filial in nearby Signaghi, and a brilliant theoretician of languages. Suleiman was writing a book about how all languages of the world could be traced to his own native tongue: Vainakh, the language spoken by the Chechens, the Ingush, and by his own people, the Kists. Suleiman, the Georgians whispered amongst themselves, was a Vainakh nationalist. As such he posed a threat to the stability of the Georgian state, and that meant that the Georgians did everything they could to make sure that he had no influence on the business of ruling the country.

Suleiman is probably the only person in the world who is a member both of the Chechen and the Georgian Union of Writers. In this part of the world, such official designations carry with them promises of government subventions, prestige, and possibilities for publication. What made Suleiman different from his peers and what made him a problem for his wife was that in spite of his fame and the respect he commanded among his fellow Kists, he had also been blacklisted by the mainstream Georgian intellectual elite. As a Kist, an ethnic minority in Georgian society, as well as a minority within his own ethnic group the Vainakh, Suleiman was doubly marginalized. His marginalization seemed to motivate his theories concerning the innate superiority of Vainakh, and of the Kist subset within it, to all the languages and other ethnicities in the world.

I was fascinated by the boldness of Suleiman’s argumentative thinking as much as I was astonished by the flaws in his hypotheses, as apparent

² The most comprehensive ethnography of the Kists to date is Kurtsikidze and Chikovani 2007, which contains an extensive bibliography of Georgian and Russian sources.

³ For a fuller account of Suleiman, his writings, and his intellectual genealogy, see Gould 2007.

to himself as to anyone else. He enjoyed making absurd statements just to hear his own voice. But the more he spoke, the more convinced he became of his premises. More than once, Suleiman's penchant for provocative statements had gotten him into trouble. It had cut him off from his primary source of income, his job with the Georgian Ministry of Education, and now there were rumours that he might lose his teaching job as well (which would not have been a disaster, as his salary for teaching totalled twenty dollars a month, just enough to pay for his transportation to and from the university).

The Gumashvili family was on the brink of a financial crisis, but no one worried about this less than Suleiman. His wife Kato seemed to be the only one concerned. More than the implications of her husband's theories, she was concerned for her family's financial wellbeing. His ideas were also a subject of her criticisms during our hours alone, once her children and husband had gone to bed. Alone among all who comprised Suleiman's audience, Kato reacted against the nuanced racism and less-nuanced intolerance that laced her husband's ideas with barely-concealed scorn.

And yet, at the same time, Kato was deeply proud of her husband's achievements. She boasted to me on more than one occasion of how on his sixtieth birthday the entire elite of Georgia had filled their house for a party, presided over by the President of the Union of Georgian Writers. Those days had long passed by summer 2006, the season of my lengthiest visit. Suleiman had gone from being a local hero to an old man, whom people listened to only because they didn't want to show their disrespect publicly.

Kato and Suleiman rarely made eye contact. Suleiman frequently mocked his wife's appearance in my presence. Once, during a dinner for which I was the guest of honour, Suleiman interrupted his habitually hour-long lecture praising Kist matrimonial traditions and methods of childrearing to toast my bright future as a wife to an obedient Georgian man. "My wife" – he thundered, his huge belly tumbling over the table edge – "is the ugliest woman on earth. She knows her place, she knows what she has to do, how she has to serve me. She does this because I deserve service from her. It is my male privilege. If she were educated like me, then I would have

to serve her. We each know our place. That's how it should be. That's the way I like it. I am proud of our Kist traditions”.

Kato left the room whenever Suleiman delivered one of his degrading toasts praising his wife as a workhorse and invariably accompanied by the “boast” that she was the ugliest woman in the world.

I could not help but suspect that Kato felt nothing but contempt for her husband's grand ideas concerning the ancient origins of the Vainakh race. On many occasions Suleiman's lectures culminated in lengthy monologues concerning the language most worthy of the epithet “beautiful” (*silamazi*): Chechen, Kist, Ingush, Georgian, Russian, or English. Kato interrupted one such deliberation with a memorable statement: “No language is more beautiful than another. Any language made by humans is beautiful.” Her words put an effective stop to Suleiman's disquisition, and, though he did not say anything, it was clear that she had won that argument.

With the onset of the Chechen-Russian war, already a quarter-century old, Pankisi had witnessed a surge of new immigration of Chechens over the past two decades, peaking in 2000, the year of the most intense bombing campaign ever witnessed in that part of the world. Kato had hosted many of these Chechen refugees in her spacious home. She marshalled examples of her community's hospitality towards refugees in order to demonstrate the superiority of Muslim social values to Christian ones. Through this articulation of what she called *taqwa* (piety), Kato underscored differences she perceived between Islamic and Christian concepts of selfhood:

“We have one thing here you don't have in the West: self-respect.” She continued:

In America, all people think about is freedom. Here we have something better than freedom. Here we know the value of human life. We respect others because we respect ourselves. That's why I couldn't refuse to help the Chechens who needed homes and food. That's why you folks in the West are so miserable. You know what freedom is, but you don't know happiness.

I asked her what her idea of happiness was. “Children,” she said without missing a beat. “Only children can make a woman happy. For children,

a woman will endure anything." "Even a violent husband?" I asked. "Absolutely. Children make any kind of suffering meaningful."

Kato's intelligence was evident in her ability to challenge the expectations of interlocutors such as myself. More than two decades before we met, she had been kidnapped by her husband Suleiman. Yet of all the women in Georgia's Pankisi Gorge, Kato was among the most forceful defenders of the traditional values that sanctioned bride-kidnapping and that held female rape victims responsible for being raped.

"With us, if a woman is raped, it's her fault," she once declared to me over breakfast and coffee. At first, I thought she was trying to provoke me, and I began to protest: "But what if the woman is attacked?" "That never happens among us," she said flatly. "Our men know better than to violate our customs." "What if she gets raped in the city, in Tbilisi, far from her fellow Kists? What if she is attacked by Georgians? Is it her fault then?" I asked again. She replied. "Of course! She shouldn't be out among Georgians in the first place. She should stay with her own people."

As shocking as such views sounded to ears unaccustomed to hear them articulated, they should be contextualized in terms of the broad social mechanisms that Kists had developed to keep women from danger. Only a year prior to my visit to Pankisi, the wife of Avtandil Gumashvili—a distant relative of Suleiman Gumashvili—had been raped by the leading member of another family, named Margoshvili (Natsvlshvili 2009: 35-9). The Pankisi community was united in assuming that it was her husband's responsibility to avenge the rape of his wife by killing the perpetrator. Although the rape was never successfully avenged because the authorities killed Avtandil before he could take action, everyone assumed that it was the husband's responsibility to avenge his wife's sexual violation rather than to stand by passively or to blame her.

With her remarks about rape as being the women's responsibility, Kato wasn't trying to provoke me into an argument. It might even be debated that her efforts to shift agency away from the men and onto the women were part of an attempt to claim female sovereignty. Yet there was also a cultural dimension to her claims. As part of her project to demonstrate to me the superiority of traditional Muslim values to what she considered

newfangled, illegitimate, and alien Christian ones, she marshalled examples of the secure kinship networks that bound Muslims from Pankisi together, and which she deemed vastly superior to the disintegrated social networks of Christian Georgia and post-Christian America.

Kato's cultural investments led her to adapt women's interests to patriarchal norms, a process described in Kay Ann Johnson's ethnography of Confucian women invested in maintaining patriarchal values. "In the very process of using available mechanisms for greater influence and protection," writes Johnson, "women's strategies directly and indirectly reinforced the traditional Confucian family system" (Johnson 1985: 21). This insight leads Johnson to conclude that "through their actions to resist passivity and total male control, [women] became participants with vested interests in the system that oppressed them" (1985: 21). And yet it was not merely complicity with patriarchy that dictated Kato's defence of patriarchal norms. Kato's propensity to hold the rape victim in contempt was one consequence of an identity that was constituted through more than gender.

The division of labour and behavioural roles between men and women was, Kato perceived, a distinction that varied according to culture. She was determined to remain loyal to pre-colonial Kist gender norms against what were perceived as colonial impositions of alien norms. At the same time as a culturally-inflected identity looks beyond gender, however, it remains inseparable from this category in its manifold articulations. The tension between cultural and gendered identities and loyalties gives rise to what Deniz Kandiyoti has famously referred to as "bargaining with patriarchy" (Kandiyoti 1988). In this reflection on the everyday violence and quotidian grief that marks the domestic landscape of contemporary Pankisi, I aim to move us closer to grasping in all their many-layered nuances the fault lines through which patriarchal bargains are illustrated.

I was unable to grasp the full intricacies of Kato's views on gender until we became more intimately acquainted. After a month's hiatus, during which I had been consumed with work in Tbilisi, I returned to Pankisi. I arrived in late August, on a *marshrutka* (chartered bus), from Tbilisi. My hosts were exhausted from daily chores, Kato from cooking and Suleiman

from musing grandly. With little energy to talk, after greeting and kissing me, they asked permission to go to sleep. I was given a place to sleep in a bed next to Kato's. Suleiman told me that because I was an honoured guest, I could not be allowed to sleep in the spare bedroom. "My wife must watch over you," he said. "We need to guard you tonight." It was winter and therefore cold in the spare bedroom; perhaps this, along with Pankisi's customary hospitality morality, was another factor in the insistence that I not sleep alone.

That night, Kato told me the story of her life. She woke me up—it must have been three in the morning—to complain about a pain that, as she expressed it, was burning her back and travelling up and down her neck: "I can't afford the medicine I need to cure my pain. It hurts so much! Sometimes I wonder if I'll survive. It's amazing how much pain we all live through to stay human." I remained silent as the tar-coloured air seeped through the windows. It was deathly quiet outside. Kato turned over on her back and moaned. Then she said: "I can't stand the pain! If only Suleiman would find work again, then he could pay for my treatments. The doctors told me that there is medicine that can heal me, but it costs too much." Money puts a limit on everything, I philosophized, painfully aware that my words could not reduce her suffering.

To distract her, I tried to push the conversation in a different direction. I asked, "Was Suleiman your first husband?" "I was married before" she replied. Kato seemed to be relieved to talk about something other than her pain, and she launched into a narrative:

My first husband left me for another woman. Then Suleiman's first wife died. He needed someone to take care of his house. His two boys needed a mother. So he kidnapped me. I didn't know anything about him. The last thing I wanted was to be kidnapped. But no one was asking me.

This was all Kato had to say on the matter of her consent to her condition. Her recitation of the kidnapping incident hovered over the borderline Cynthia Werner has described, whereby it is impossible to fully distinguish consensual bride kidnapping from non-consensual violation. "Although most brides are kidnapped by men they know," writes Werner, "and many

are kidnapped with their full consent [...] there are other women who are kidnapped by strangers without their consent” (Werner 2004: 60). Ayres notes that bridal abduction can range in meaning from “genuine bride theft” to “mock bride theft” to “ceremonial capture” to consensual “elopement” and non-consensual- “raiding” (Ayres 1974). What of women like Kato who are kidnapped by men they don’t know against their will and who later seek to justify their husbands’ behaviour, and yet who at the same time are never fully reconciled to their condition?

Kato interrupted her narrative of being kidnapped to ask me when I was going to get married. “You must have children...” she persisted. “Only children will make a woman happy. It doesn’t matter who your husband is. With children, anything can be endured.”

“Did you love him?” I asked, trying to return the conversation to the subject of bride kidnapping. “Who?” Kato asked blankly. “Your husband. Suleiman.” I responded.

“Of course not!” Kato said. “How could I love a man I’ve never met?” Then, more concerned by my fate than by her own predicament, she stared at me through the darkness and, placing her hand on top of mine, she said: “You must marry. Don’t wait any longer. It doesn’t matter whether you love your husband. It’s time for you to have children. No more procrastinating. If you don’t do it now, soon it will be too late.”

In Kato’s view, my welfare was best served through a patriarchal bargain similar to the one she had consented to herself.

Just as Kato diligently pursued her task of arranging my life and securing my happiness, I was busy trying to figure out what it meant to be Kato: kidnapped, constantly at work raising children or taking care of the house, and also to understand why she kept insisting that her way of life was superior in every way to my own.

“If you don’t love Suleiman, why do you stay with him?” I asked, ignoring her concern for my marital future. Yet Kato was not about to allow the subject to change so fast. “Among us,” she said, “a woman doesn’t get respect until she is married. When she moves into her husband’s house, people look at her differently. She is not fully a woman until she is married and has children.”

"So that's why you didn't leave Suleiman when he kidnapped you?" I persisted. Kato nodded, stating:

His children treated me kindly, but nothing can replace a child's love for his real mother. It was difficult. I worked without rest. That's probably why I'm in so much pain now. But I couldn't leave. I am respected in the community because I was loyal. I am honoured for never leaving Suleiman and for raising his children during tough times. When I walk through this village, people look at me with respect. That's enough for me.

"But are you happy? Wouldn't it be better if you had a husband you loved?" She commented:

Loving your husband is not important. Children bring happiness. Children are all a woman needs in life. All you Americans ever think about is yourself. Does such selfishness make you happy? As far as I can see, you are all more miserable than us. At least we Pankisi women know our place. American women are still trying to figure out their place in their societies. I pity you and your fellow women. A woman who doesn't have kids will never know happiness.

Rays of sunlight began to stream gently through the dissipating darkness. Kato turned over onto her other side and moaned, then fell silent. The pain had become bearable, and, apparently, talking had helped. "You know what makes us different from you Americans?" she asked after a long pause, adding:

We are Muslim. We understand the value of being human. We respect each other as equals. If we were Christian, we would all be like you, thinking first of yourselves and searching only for your own happiness. But we know that life is about respect and honour [*namusi*], not about what we do in solitude. Islam teaches hospitality [*stumarmaspindzloba*], to respect the outsider and treat him honourably. We respect you, but we still know that our lives here are better than in your home country.

Kato's conception of the communal Islamic ethos enabled a form of ethical life that Christianity, as she understood it, could not account for. She did not invoke the classic terms she could have used to bolster her

argument for the uniqueness of the Islamic vision of a common humanity: *umma* (the community of believers). Instead she spoke of *namusi* (honour), a Georgian term that at once invokes conscience and consciousness and which is ultimately derived from the Greek *nomos* (custom, law). But the *umma* was implicit in her thinking, or, rather, her thinking was implicit in this concept.

Kato's ideas of honour and custom contrast with another commonplace linkage: of the Islamic ethos to a particular mode of waging war, called, in the context of the Chechen Wars that had recently transformed the Pankisi landscape, the black widow phenomenon: bereaved women avenging their husband's death through public explosions. Time and again during the course of my fieldwork among the women of Pankisi and Chechnya I observed how Islam was linked to the ethical capacity for appreciating difference and respecting the other, while wartime violence was connected to the military state and detached from religion.

During the conversation that ensued, it became clear that Kato's confidence in the superiority of the values by which she organized her life derived from the very elements I had perceived as limitations: the closed community in which she had been born, the restrictions on women's mobility, the irrevocability of her fate; all of these things were precisely what brought joy and confidence into Kato's life. Kato believed so deeply in the superiority of her values to those that governed American life that she sought to convert me to her way of seeing. Throughout our encounters, I was the observed and she was the observer. In keeping with Kandiyoti's stipulation, Kato selectively applied patriarchal norms to advance non-patriarchal agendas that were implicitly feminist inasmuch as they clarified her role in the world and attested to her agency.

To draw out further the implications of the patriarchal bargains that held intact the fabric of everyday life in the Pankisi Gorge, Kato's typology of cultures suggested a non-liberal vision of the self in many contemporary Muslim societies, which feminist scholars of modern Islam have only begun to address. Chandra Mohanty, Saba Mahmood, and Wendy Brown have in their respective works used this non-liberal self as envisioned in contemporary Muslim contexts to contest the fantasy of Western women

as “secular, liberated, and having control over their own lives” (Mohanty 1988: 74). This stereotype, notes Brown, is “derived in part from the very figure of an oppressed Third World opposite” (2006: 189). Even more ambitiously, Mahmood examines the liberal model of human action that “pre-supposes [...] a natural disjuncture between a person’s ‘true’ desires and those that are socially prescribed” (2005: 149), looking to ways of thinking accountable for Kato’s critique of American civilization and defence of Muslim customs.

The post-liberal critiques of philosophies that construe political engagement solely through the paradigm of resistance to societal norms offered by Mahmood, Mohanty, and Brown help us move beyond the misleading assumption that freedom is attained only in opposition to power. Brown’s diagnosis of the limitations of western liberalism is clear: “by formulating freedom as choice and reducing the political to policy and law, liberalism sets loose, in a depoliticized underworld, a sea of social powers nearly as coercive as law, and certainly as effective in producing subjectivated subjects” (2006: 197). Helping us move beyond liberalism’s reductive horizons, Kandiyoti has given us the analytical paradigm of the patriarchal bargain.

For Christian Americans, in Kato’s view, the purpose of life devolves on the individual. Islam as she understood it grounded its ethics in the community (*umma*) rather than the isolated self, ultimately for the good of both individual and community. Compared with such benefits, the difficulties of kidnapping or otherwise undesired marriage seemed trivial rites of passage in the long span of a woman’s existence. Neither Kato nor I slept after our conversation. Instead, she lectured me on everything she felt I needed to know about what a woman needed to be happy. If I didn’t have kids, she warned, she would not let me past the gates of her home when I returned to visit her, even if I came all the way from America. I don’t necessarily read Kato’s admonitions literally. I returned on subsequent occasions to visit her without indicating any plans ever to get married, and her hospitality did not diminish. Nonetheless, her persistence revealed the importance of motherhood and marriage to her conception of a woman’s destiny.

“One path awaits you,” Kato warned, as the darkness gave way to light outside. “Suffering and misery, the lot of every woman. Women are born for suffering. There is no other way for them, no other kind of life. You should not pretend as though there is any way out for you either. If you think you can be happy while considering only your own freedom, you’re fooling yourself.”

Then she turned on her back again and gritted her teeth to keep from moaning. “Pain helps,” she said. “It reminds me that I am alive.” Our twilight conversation drew to a close. Kato turned over onto her side once again. I glanced outside. It was a beautiful dusk, shading into morning, with the arrival of a dim, as yet invisible, sun. A muezzin’s call to prayer resounded from a minaret at the edge of the village. Only the mosques in Duisi, the town next to Joqolo, and Omalo, a kilometre north, were equipped with minarets, funded in most cases by so-called Wahhabis.⁴ Perhaps the call to prayer was echoing from one of those minarets, I thought, or perhaps one of Joqolo’s mullahs had taken it upon himself to assemble the faithful in these mid-morning hours, on an as-yet-to-be-discovered pretext.

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⁴ The term Wahhabi in this context refers to a conservative reformist movement, founded in Saudi Arabia by Muhammad Ibn Abd-al-Wahhab (d. 1792), and influential in some contemporary Muslim societies, particularly with the young generation.

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