

## II. Elopement, Marriage by Kidnapping, and Escape from Marriage

Marriage by kidnapping or elopement is a kind of informal marriage, where the boy and girl who love each other get unofficially "married". Such marriage customs are prevalent among ethnic minorities whose unmarried young boys and girls enjoy full freedom in society. Generally, the man and the woman have been together for a period of time and hope to officially get married, but the parents, cannot come to agreement on the details of the union. These disagreements are usually caused by the girl's parents asking for too much in terms of a betrothal gift. Negotiations reach a deadlock and the marriage cannot go ahead. Under such circumstances, the man and girl elope.

Furthermore, in societies where marriage procedures involve a considerable economic burden, the couple deliberately arrange a "kidnap" marriage in order to simplify things and avoid trouble and conflict. The animal years of birth of both "husband" and "wife" are examined to see whether they are compatible and divination is practiced, but no wedding ceremony is celebrated for a "kidnap" marriage.

When an Ewenki couple in the Hulunber League of Chenbarho Banner in Inner Mongolia try to settle on a date for their wedding, the man tells his parents while keeping the date secret from the girl's parents. The man's parents prepare the bed and felts and erect a new Mongolian tent, near which another tent is also erected. On the night of their marriage, the girl steals out of her family's tent, and rides on horseback with her sweetheart to another tent, where an old lady invited by the bridegroom does the girl's hair from the eight plaits of girlhood to the two pigtails of a young married woman. At daybreak, the man's family sends some people to the girl's family to offer them wine and apologize. Great ceremonial efforts are made in an attempt to be forgiven by the girl's family.

Zhuang marriage (called Befi'en in Zhuang Language) is also a form of marriage by capture. The young man and woman who fall in love with each other at the song festivals arrange their own marriages. If any of the parents disagree

with the marriage, the groom will arrange his friends to go together with him to carry off the bride who dresses up in her Sunday best on the appointed day. After their first child is born, the spouses will take their baby and some gifts and pay a visit on the wife's parents who at that time have no choice but to accept the marriage.

Marriage by kidnapping is an interesting phenomenon. Typically the boy and the girl have the desire to get married, but the girl's parents oppose the marriage, even sometimes even going as far as hiding their daughter. In response the boy's family just go to the girl's village, find a sympathetic collaborator, and simply "steal" away the girl hiding her in the house of the local who helped them. Then the boy's family arranges for the matchmaker replete with the betrothal gifts to go to tell the girls parents that their daughter has been kidnapped. The girl's parents realize that there is now no point in opposing the marriage and they reluctantly accept the betrothal gifts.

In the Achang, when the boy's marriage proposal is refused or if his family cannot afford the appropriate betrothal gifts, the boy and the girl secretly fix a date for their elopement. At that time the boy together with some of his friends for backup kidnaps the girl who pretends to cry for help so as to maintain the illusion that she is being kidnapped. Because the girl's parents are not prepared for these events, the elopement usually occurs smoothly. The next day, the boy's family arrange for a matchmaker to try to persuade the recalcitrant parents to let the marriage go ahead. According to custom, once a girl has been kidnapped by a man, she belongs to him and cannot legitimately marry another afterwards. For this reason the girl's parents have little choice but to agree to the marriage. If the girl's parents remain firm in their opposition, the boy and the girl elope.

Such "kidnap-elopement" marriages, are common among many ethnic groups including the Jingpo, Lisu, Pumi, Nu, Shui, Naxi, Achang and Lhoba. This practice comes from the old custom of kidnapping girls and forcing them to marry but in recent times the practice has evolved into the modern manifestation where very often the girl is a willing accomplice in the "kidnap".

The Jingpo people believe a kidnapped wife to be a propitious figure. Many prefer to kidnap girls for their brides, believing that this helps the bride to get rid of any wildness of spirit she may still have. In many instances, this old-fashioned marriage by kidnapping is regarded as a religious ritual.

