

Karakalpak Family Values

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Despite warnings over the mental and physical dangers of intermarriage Karakalpak traditions prevail

Oinisa Akhmedova thinks admitting an outsider to your family is like "buying a pig in a poke". Marry a relative is her advice. Well, it's obvious: you know who you're dealing with, says the grandmother, who evidently holds sway over her family's affairs.

The inhabitants of Uzbekistan's autonomous republic of Karakalpakstan long ago came to the conclusion that marrying 'outside' the family is just not a risk worth taking. But age-old traditions don't always lead to happiness. Especially when parents are deciding who marries who as Arslan Alimkulov knows only too well.

He's 28, has two university degrees and works as a car mechanic to support his children and Karima, the cousin and wife he doesn't love.

Four years ago he was in love. But not with Karima. Their loveless marriage is a mess of family rows, regrets, thoughts of what might have been. "I will never force my sons to marry against their will," said Arslan. "I know what it means to live with a woman you don't love.

I couldn't go against my parents' will though, as they have done a lot for me. But, given a chance to start all over again, I would have definitely chosen another life."

Intermarriage is the norm in this region, which hugs the southern shore of the Aral Sea. Parents subject their children to emotional blackmail - turning down a proposed match is viewed as an insult to the family. And once you've made the trip down the aisle, relatives are going to make sure that that's the way it stays. Divorce is considered a grave dishonour, which can lead to total ostracism. And if your partner dies? Well, the family will probably come up with a replacement. As happened to Gulsara Shoimordonova whose first husband, her cousin died leaving her with three children.

The family gathered and decided that at the end of the 100 day mourning period she would marry her late husband's younger brother, Rakhim. Not that Rakhim had been asked. The overriding concern was to keep the family together. Were she to marry an outsider, she might leave with the children.

These arranged marriages cause more than emotional trauma. One well-known local general practitioner Tokhtoboi-tabib blames many of the cases of mental disorder and deformities - like hair lips and cleft palates - on interbreeding. He says the former are the bigger problem.

Paediatrician Zemfira Akhmedova, who heads a crisis counselling centre in Nukus, Karakalpakstan's administrative centre, agrees. "As small children, they are practically no different from their peers," she said. "Deviations do not usually surface until school age. They have learning problems; they are edgy, aggressive, sullen and withdrawn."

Tokhtoboi-tabib said parents of retarded or deformed children never acknowledge that their problems may be the consequence of intermarriage. The authorities are so concerned over the issue that they are discussing ways of improving child health.

President Karimov believes that one of the ways forward would be to educate people about the danger of intermarriage, to explain that incestuous unions produce ailing children who become a shame and a liability for its parents.

But the government seems powerless when faced with traditional belief systems - other attempts to haul lifestyles into the 21st century have met with fierce resistance in the region.

The national family planning programme, for example, was abandoned recently, with Karakalpaks accusing the government of poking its nose into business which had nothing to do with them - according to Islam, they say, it's Allah, and not the current government who decides how many children you bear.

As for the chances of giving birth to an unhealthy child, Oinisa said, "Everything is in Allah's hands - whatever He decides goes."

Karina Insarova is a pseudonym of a journalist in Karakalpakstan

Location: [Uzbekistan](#)

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