

Introduction

Personal experiences of four Skya rgya residents illustrate what marriage means to locals. The first narrative reveals how Bkra shis married at a young age and how the marriage failed—as is often the case for this type of arranged marriage between young children. The second narrative shows how Sgron skyid was deceitfully abducted and married to a childless man whose family accused her of being unable to have children and forced her to leave. She then remarried and in 2006 fortunately, leads a pleasant life. In the third narrative, we meet a woman who married a man who became very arrogant after obtaining a government job and then did not stop mistreating his wife until she fled to the city in an attempt to start a new life. The fourth narrative describes the failure of Lha skyid's marriage when it was discovered she had been sexually active before her marriage with a man who was not her husband.

Voice One: Bkra shis (b. 1979) Married at the Age of Fourteen

Grandmother Insists I Marry

Grandmother was talking, again, about a ten-year-old girl who was absolutely a stranger to me—a nine year old boy. “G.yang ‘dzoms is a very nice kid. She is smart, fully grown up and pretty. We were neighbors in the mountains for some time. She was there with A ye O drug, her grandmother, and I know her well. She is obedient, full of respect towards elders and she is friendly with her playmates. Everyone knows that her mother is a great housewife and everyone believes that she will be just like her mother. She will surely do well in our home if her family agrees to let her wed our son.”

Grandmother persuaded my father to approach her. “Our son has grown up. It is now time for us to engage him, otherwise all the good girls will be spoken for. G.yang ‘dzoms is already being approached by two wealthy families—Rdo tshe and Kun thar—both of whom have government salaries and own large and richly furnished houses, but she has not yet been promised. If you are concerned about our son's future, we should hurriedly approach her. Since our two families have been on good terms for generations, I feel she'll be given to our family if we try. Moreover, G.yang ‘dzoms' mother is my niece and if I personally talk to her, there is a great possibility that G.yang ‘dzoms will be given to our family.

About the Matchmaker

I was eleven when my parents made the final decision after they consulted A myes Da hen, a local fortune-teller, and selected a woman named Dpa' mo in the girl's village to

be the matchmaker. They thought she was well qualified to be a matchmaker because she was Grandmother's brother's daughter, was extremely persuasive and she was also G.yang 'dzoms' mother's younger sister.

Early one auspicious morning my father prepared two mules and Dkon mchog, my mother's youngest brother, was called to my home to escort the matchmaker to my home. He soon left for the matchmaker's home riding one mule and leading the other. In about an hour, Dkon mchog returned to my home with the matchmaker. A feast of mutton, *rtsam pa*, steamed beef dumplings and other food prepared on the previous day was offered to them. While eating, my father and the matchmaker discussed what to say to G.yang 'dzoms' father and what gifts to offer.

After the meal, it was time for the matchmaker to go to G.yang 'dzoms' home because it was half past ten and it is customarily unacceptable for a matchmaker to visit a family after noon. The matchmaker then left for the girl's home with a tea brick, a *kha btags*,²⁶ a bowl and 200 RMB. It was the first time and, as expected, her family refused the engagement by insisting that their daughter was the center pole of their home and it was impossible for her to marry out. On the matchmaker's second visit, she was treated better and the family asked her to bring me with her to their home on the next visit.

Upon hearing the matchmaker's report, my heart throbbed just like a drum in a temple dance court. I felt both curiosity and trepidation. I was told to behave well in that home—to show respect in such ways as standing up when family members came near me and to talk gently to them. Night deepened. The matchmaker described how nicely she had been treated in that home and said complimentary things about G.yang 'dzoms. All listened to her with attentive concentration, while I fell into a deep slumber.

The Matchmaker and I Visit My Prospective Bride

The next morning at around ten, the matchmaker and I set off for G.yang 'dzoms' home. It took us less than an hour to arrive. A big meal was prepared for us and we were asked to sit on the *heeze* that was covered with brand-new white felt. There was nothing for me to say or do. I just sat, drinking bowls of tea on the *heeze* with the matchmaker. There was much talking. When agreement was almost reached, the girl's oldest brother stood and sang this song to the matchmaker:

The Prospective Bride's Oldest Brother's Song²⁷

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ངེད་གི་ཨ་ཙེ་གསེར་མོ་མཚོ།
 གསེར་གི་སྲུ་གིས་ཁོར་བྱིན་ཟེར།
 གཉེན་དེ་གར་མ་སྟེར་བྱེད་ཀར་བྱིན།
 བྱེད་ཀར་འགྲུགས་སྲུང་ཆེ་ཟློག་ཡོད།

²⁶ *Kha btags* are white silk scarves that are locally offered when visiting someone respectable or friends and soliciting a favor. They are also offered to deity images in temples. The delicacy and quality of the material of which they are made, their length, width and whether they have been used before or are pristinely new denote the degree of esteem in which the recipient of *kha btags* is held, as well as the means of the person giving the *kha btags*.

²⁷ Sung by Phag mo sgrol ma.