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Japan's princess Mako marries years after 'pain' of rumors

Japan's princess Mako married her university sweetheart yesterday, but it was a low-key union bereft of traditional rituals, with the couple voicing sadness over the controversy that haunted their engagement. Under the rules of the imperial family, Emperor Naruhito's 30-year-old niece Mako gave up her royal title as she wed Kei Komuro, who is the same age and works for a US law firm. "To me, Kei is irreplaceable. Our marriage is a necessary step for us to be able to protect our hearts," she told reporters after the marriage was registered.



This file photo taken on October 22, 2019 shows Japan's Princess Mako (right) attending the enthronement ceremony where Emperor Naruhito officially proclaimed his ascension to the Chrysanthemum Throne at the Imperial Palace in Tokyo.



This file photo taken on September 3, 2017 shows Japan's Princess Mako (right), the eldest daughter of Prince Akishino and Princess Kiko, looking at her fiancée Kei Komuro (left), as they meet the media during a press conference to announce their engagement at the Akasaka East Residence in Tokyo.



This combination of file photos shows a Jiji Press image of Kei Komuro (left) and Japan's Princess Mako (right), daughter of Crown Prince Akishino, leaving the Imperial Palace in Tokyo. — AFP photos

"I have been scared, feeling sadness and pain whenever one-sided rumors turn into groundless stories," she added as the newlyweds read out rehearsed statements in a soberly decorated hotel function room. Since announcing their engagement in 2017, the couple has faced tabloid scandals and vicious online sniping over allegations that Komuro's family had run into financial difficulties. After much delay, they

finally tied the knot with no wedding ceremony, reception banquet or any of the usual rites-opting to do so privately, away from a public that has not always been kind.

Mako also turned down a large payment usually offered to royal women on their departure, reportedly up to 153 million yen (\$1.35 million), and they are now said to be planning a move to the United States. Royals are held to exacting standards in Japan, and Mako has developed complex post-traumatic stress disorder because of the media attention, according to the Imperial Household Agency. "I love Mako. We only get one life, and I want us to spend it with the one we love," Komuro said. "I feel very sad that Mako has been in a bad condition, mentally and physically, because of the false accusations." The couple did not answer questions from

reporters verbally, to make the experience less stressful for Mako, the household said. But in a document given to reporters, she said her condition was "not good".

'Regrettable' situation

Women in the imperial family cannot ascend the Chrysanthemum Throne, and lose their royal status when they marry a commoner. TV footage showed the princess bid farewell to her mother yesterday morning, bowing to her mother and father, Crown Prince Akishino, and hugging her sister. Despite the negative press coverage and small but angry protests against the marriage, more than half of respondents in a survey by the Yomiuri Shimbun daily said they thought it was a good thing.

"The most important thing is that she is happy," Tokyo resident Machiko

Yoshimoto, in her 60s, told AFP. "It would have been better to have a festive atmosphere, instead of this difficult situation, which is rather sad and regrettable," said Shigehiro Hashimoto, 54. While Japanese media initially fawned over Komuro, reports soon emerged that his mother had failed to repay a four-million-yen loan from a former fiancé. As pressure grew on the couple, the wedding was postponed and Komuro moved to New York for law school in 2018, a move seen as a bid to defuse negative attention.

Mako said yesterday she had encouraged Komuro to "establish a life overseas". Their reported plan to move to the US, where Komuro works, has drawn inevitable comparisons with another royal couple who faced a media onslaught: Britain's Prince Harry and Meghan Markle. It is not

clear if Mako will work, but she is well qualified, having studied art and cultural heritage at Tokyo's International Christian University. She also holds a Master's degree from Britain's University of Leicester. The Japanese throne can pass only to male members of the family, and the children of female royals who marry commoners are not included.

There has been some debate over changing the rules, and a government panel in July compiled notes on the issue including a proposal that royal women stay in the family, even after marriage. Although polls show the public broadly support women being allowed to rule, any change is likely to be slow, with traditionalists vehemently opposed. — AFP

For the first time in months, members of Afghanistan's all-female Zohra orchestra have reassembled in Doha, their music once again filling the air as they face an uncertain future. While grateful to be safe in Qatar, their escape from Taleban rule is bittersweet, as the girls leave behind friends from the orchestra and their "old companions"—their instruments. Last week marked the first time in three months that Marzia Anwari, along with other members of the Afghan music community who escaped to Qatar, played live for an audience.

"Most of the girls from the Zohra orchestra are here with me in Qatar, but some of them are still in Afghanistan," the 18-year-old violinist told AFP. "I hope that they can join us here as soon as possible and we can be together and rebuild our orchestra." Zohra, Afghanistan's first all-female orchestra, was established in 2016. The group of 35 young musicians aged 13-20, some orphans or from poor families, gave a culture-crossing performance at the 2017 World Economic Forum in Davos that overcame tradition and death threats in their homeland. Now in exile, and with new instruments, the musicians are hoping to keep their cultural heritage alive after the Islamist hardliners seized power in August.

Everything is 'haram'

Music was banned when the Taleban last ruled Afghanistan from 1996 to 2001, and since their return, women's freedoms and education have again been abruptly curtailed. "In Afghanistan, they consider everything 'haram' (religiously forbidden) for women, particularly music," Anwari said. It was difficult to be a working musician even before the takeover, she said,



Shogofa Safi, percussionist and conductor of the Zohra orchestra, plays along with other members of the Afghan music community who escaped to Qatar.

Afghan all-female orchestra keeps music alive in exile

with many conservative Afghans believing that girls belong in the home.

"When we'd go outside, people would call us... 'promiscuous' and other such things," said Anwari. The Taleban have been trying to win backing and financial support for their Islamist regime, promising a more flexible rule than last time. But since they overthrew Afghanistan's former US-backed government, high school girls have been blocked from returning to classes, while many women have been banned from returning to work.

Shogofa Safi, a percussionist and conductor of the Zohra orchestra, said she was happy to be out of Afghanistan. The 18-year-old told AFP of her harrowing escape, with Taleban militants manning Kabul airport before her evacuation flight.

"The situation in Afghanistan was really dangerous and it was scary to leave," she said. The Taleban "didn't know we were musicians", she said, adding that "if they had known", they would have killed them.

'Beyond the borders'

Qatar is hosting about 100 students and teachers from the Afghanistan National Institute of Music (ANIM), which includes the Zohra orchestra, until they leave for Portugal. Among them is Mohammed Qambar Nawshad, conductor of the Afghan national orchestra, who said he was happy to be making music again. "We haven't been able to play for at least three months since they took Kabul. So it was a wonderful opportunity, not just for me but for the entire community to perform again, to really make their dreams come true," he said.

Nawshad had to leave his wife and two children behind, but hopes to be reunited with them soon in Qatar or Portugal. "I love Qatar and I love the people of Qatar... but I will never love it as much as I do Kabul," he said, fighting back tears. While promising more moderation, the Taleban have made clear that they will run Afghanistan according to their interpreta-

tion of sharia law. The movement's position on music is inconsistent and no clear order has yet been issued. But after the Taleban's last brutal crackdown on culture in the 1990s, many musicians are now in hiding and some have abandoned their instruments. Music schools remain closed. Anwari said she was delighted to be playing the viola again in Qatar, but "heartbroken" for the loss of her old instrument. "Even when I slept, it was right above my head," she said.

Anwari, Safi and Nawshad all said they would continue to fight for their homeland with their music, which ranges from traditional Afghan tunes to Western classical music. "We will keep it alive, the rich cultural heritage of Afghanistan—and Afghanistan itself too, beyond the borders," Nawshad said. — AFP

Ukraine hails 'long-awaited victory' in Crimea gold case

Kiev hailed a victory over Russia yesterday after a Dutch appeals court ruled that a priceless collection of Crimean gold stuck for years in the Netherlands be handed over to Ukraine. President Volodymyr Zelensky said the "long-awaited victory" to return the treasure, which had been loaned to an Amsterdam museum shortly before Moscow annexed Crimea in 2014, was a "fair decision". "We always regain what's ours. After the 'Scythian gold', we'll return Crimea," Zelensky said on Twitter.



In this file picture released by the Allard Pierson Museum shows a 1st-century AD golden pendant in the shape of a deer, found in a grave at the necropolis of Ust'Alma and which is part of the 'Crimea: Gold and Secrets of the Black Sea' at the Allard Pierson Museum in Amsterdam. — AFP photos



In this file handout picture shows a second century AD golden earring with glass inlay and figurine, found in a woman's grave at the necropolis of Ust'Alma.

Four Crimean museums launched a legal bid seven years ago to force the Allard Pierson Museum to return the collection of archaeological artefacts dubbed the "Scythian Gold" to the peninsula. A lower Dutch court said in 2016 that the treasures were part of Ukraine's cultural heritage and must be returned instead to Kiev, adding that Crimea was not considered a sovereign state. The Crimean museums appealed against the judgment, saying that they belonged there.

The Dutch court of appeal said in 2019 that it needed more time to decide on the matter. Yesterday, the 2016 decision was upheld. Ukrainian Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba called the collection "part of our national code." "All Russian fakes, manipulations and attempts to mislead the court ended in failure," he said in a statement. "I am convinced that just as we have returned the Scythian gold today, we will return our people and our temporarily occupied territories," Kuleba added, referring to Crimea and separatist-controlled territory. —AFP



Members of Afghanistan's all-female Zohra orchestra along with other members of the Afghan music community who escaped to Qatar, perform during a concert in the capital Doha.



Marzia Anwari, violinist of the Zohra orchestra, performs during a rehearsal session ahead of a concert in the Qatari capital Doha.



Conductor of the Afghan national orchestra Mohammed Qambar Nawshad trains musicians of the Afghanistan National Institute of music (ANIM) which all-female Zohra orchestra is part of, ahead of a concert in the Qatari capital Doha. — AFP photos