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KAZAKH PREGNANCY, CHILDBIRTH AND CHILDCARE TRADITIONS*

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ABSTRACT
The article deals with customs and rituals related to pregnancy, childbirth and childcare among Kazakhs at the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th centuries, and the preservation and changes in these traditions today. The article is based on written data, as well as field data collected by authors from East Kazakhstan. The customs of the Kazakh people are connected with those of neighbouring people, including the Turkic-speaking people of Siberia and Central Asia.

The rituals associated with a pregnancy and childbirth have been divided into three main stages: prenatal customs, childbirth customs, and postpartum customs. We analysed the formation of these customs and their semantic meanings. This helps us to identify factors that have influenced and affected women's position in the family and in society, as well as those factors that led to an increase or decrease in status. Kazakhs have a particular respect for pregnant women, and the status of women who give birth to sons, or to many children, is especially high.

KEYWORDS: Kazakhs • ethnicity • nation • ethnography • traditions • food • childbirth

INTRODUCTION AND METHODOLOGY

The attitude towards birth and the customs associated with children reveal people's understandings of the world around them and of humankind. The Kazakh people hold children in high esteem and believe that the family's mainly function is to produce and bring up children. Folklore, especially proverbs and sayings, show that all Kazakh parents strive to bring a healthy child into the world. The proverb "A house with children is cheerful, a house without children is dreary" is a proof of this. Both women and men who have no children were called *ku bas* ('a single man/woman', 'unmarried man/woman') and such people could not sit next to their peers at celebrations. Apart from the potential parents all the relatives were also interested in having more children, especially boys. The social status in the tribe was determined by the number of men (warriors), and large numbers of siblings and relatives contributed to the "prestige of the person in traditional society" (Zhunusov 1992: 68). Stemming from this Kazakhs have a whole set of rules, customs and beliefs surrounding pregnancy, childbirth and the postpartum period.

Kazakh customs related to birth and children were formed through their living conditions and religious views. The article studies customs and rituals related to pregnancy, childbirth and childcare among the Kazakh people at the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th centuries, and the preservation and changes in these customs today. We aim

to describe both the formation of these customs and their semantic meaning. Rituals associated with pregnancy and childbirth have been divided into three main stages: prenatal customs, childbirth customs, and postpartum customs.

Ethnographic studies of Kazakh customs related to childbirth are rare. Data related to this issue can be found in the records of Russian travellers, tsarist officials, and researchers who visited Kazakh lands before the beginning of the 20th century. Works by Russian scientists (Potanin 1881; Grumm-Grzhimailo 1926), royal officials (Kolbasenko 1890; Sievers and Falk 1999), Soviet researchers (Rudenko 1930; Argynbayev 1973) and scientists working since Kazakh independence (Toleubayev 1991; Eskekbayev 2001; Stasevich 2011; Nurtazina 2016) contain important information.

Due to the lack of written sources, the article is also based on original material. The authors made several fieldwork trips to the regions of East Kazakhstan in July and August of 2015 to 2019. Regional centres and several settlements in the Tarbagatai region of East Kazakhstan such as Zaisan, Aksuat, Shilikta, Kokpekty, Ayagoz were taken as a basis. As a result of this research, approximately 200 people, mainly adults and elderly people, were interviewed. To complete the collected information, meetings were organised with local ethnographers and historians in district centres such as Aksuat and Akzhar.

Different research methods were combined to study the topic from a new point of view. First, the comparative-historical method was used to study various features of the customs (where and when the custom was carried out, the composition and number of participants, the main actions, the objects used, the meaning of the custom) so that the common and uncommon features could be determined in historical sequence. Second, the systematic method allowed us to consider these customs as a component of the traditional Kazakh worldview. Third, data from disciplines related to ethnography, i.e. linguistics, folklore studies, religious studies, were used to identify stable elements in the customs (the interdisciplinary method). Analysis of the traditions of the Kazakh people in comparison with the customs of the peoples of Siberia and Central Asia contributed to the differentiation of their genetic and cultural commonality.

HISTORICAL AND RELIGIOUS CONTEXT

After the 8th century and the arrival of Islam in Kazakh lands, many manifestations of the old religion had to adapt to Islamic canon. In order to strengthen and confirm its position, Islam took into account the beliefs of the local people overlapping in the Middle Ages with the pre-Islamic religions of these areas (Zoroastrianism, in some areas Buddhism, Manicheanism, Nestorian Christianity) and the remains of even earlier ancient beliefs. Over time, Islamic and pre-Islamic cults became so closely intertwined that sometimes it is very difficult, or almost impossible, to determine the exact border them in the worldview and life of the people (Toleubayev 1991: 213). Thus, 'Steppe Islam' became a tolerant religion and coexisted with theism and the traditional culture and lifestyle of the steppe. Family customs preserved to this day – for example worshiping ancestor spirits, respecting nature, cleaning with fire, lack or purdah for women – illustrate this.

Kazakh national culture was very close to disappearing during the Soviet period as Kazakhstan was subjected to atheist propaganda, russification and the promotion of a common Soviet culture. According to the colonial leftist ideology, national traditions were seen as vestiges of the old, a longing for the past, and a sign of nationalism. On the other hand, increased industrial production, urbanisation, improved healthcare services, etc., significantly affected traditional culture, for instance, baby cots replaced traditional Kazakh cradles. The homogenisation of multi-ethnic Kazakh culture in this way led to residents of urban areas to a certain extent losing their traditional culture.

However, despite atheist propaganda during the Soviet era, the people's perception of themselves as Muslims was preserved. Since the collapse of the USSR (or specifically in the Kazakh case, since 1985), the Kazakh people have had the opportunity to legally hold religious ceremonies, which to a large extent strengthened the ethnic consciousness of the people. Since then, foreign missionaries and preachers who had no idea about the ancestral path of the Kazakhs have flocked to Kazakhstan. As a result, many young people went to Arab countries to study theology, returning later to Kazakhstan to serve as imams preaching elements alien to Kazakh ancestral tradition. Since the 1990s, two powerful movements have developed in Kazakhstan: the Arab, followers of Wahhab, Ikhwan, and Hizbut Islam, and the Turkish, followers of Nujiit, Suleimen, Gulenist, and Topbash Islam. The latter movement proposes that the Kazakh people should only follow the Koran and deny their ancestral customs and traditions as they do not exist in Sharia law.

Due to Kazakhstan's economic breakdown after the collapse of the Soviet Union there was a demographic change that saw the number of small families increase along with an increase in child mortality (Kalysh 2017: 29). Reproductive health deteriorated and unemployment in the 1990s gave rise to much destructive behaviour such as drug addiction, alcoholism, prostitution, etc.

Over the last 30 years, the tolerant 'Steppe Islam', which was well-established and had lasted for centuries, has experienced some changes. At the same time, over the same period the traditional customs of the ancestors have been revived. Such customs are preserved at a high level, especially in the western, southern and eastern regions of Kazakhstan. However, the customs of the Kazakh people that relate to childbirth have not lost their relevance and we can see long-standing continuity in the modern customs associated with childbirth: "Many innovations and modifications have made minor changes in customs, while their final essence is preserved and evenly distributed" (Bayburin 1993: 25). Even today, Kazakh family customs are based on the Islamic religion, although religious concepts before the advent of Islam coexist.

FERTILITY AND PRENATAL CUSTOMS

Between the end of the 19th century and the middle of the 20th century, the Kazakh people gave great importance to the birth and continuation of the genetic line of newlyweds. Therefore, during their engagement special attention was paid to the social status of the bridegroom's family, which usually contains a large number of relatives. Kazakhs considered infertility to be a great misfortune for a family. According to popular under-

standing there was a belief that infertility comes from the evil eye, and that infertile women in particular were affected by evil demons such as devils, black angels, etc.

From the day when a woman became a wife, various customs were performed with a view to getting pregnant. For example, the new bride used to hold a child on her lap in order to have a child as early as possible (FM: B. K. b). Alternatively, she might eat part of an abomasum (part of the ruminant intestine), which Kazakhs associated with a having boy, a custom also know among Turkic people (Sahin and Sahin 2018: 5). Kazakhs in Uzbekistan used to roll a boy or a girl over the marital bed, depending on what gender of the child newlyweds wanted (Kalshabayeva 2011: 294). Kazakhs in Turkmenistan and Karakalpakstan used to make bridal dolls, wrap the doll in a scarf and sell it to the bridegroom's relatives as a wish for the newlyweds to have a baby (ibid.). The ritual of feeding the newlyweds with the legs of a freshly slaughtered animal was also intended to give the young bride a son (Snesarev 1969: 254), a tradition that is preserved by Kazakhs living in rural areas.

A woman who had not given birth would steal the placenta of another woman, say a prayer and hold it while it was still warm. Then she had to bury the placenta. Because of the belief that the new-born child of a woman whose placenta was stolen might die, it was best to ask for rather than steal the placenta. However, women would not usually agree to this because they believed that this way they might not have any more children. Sometimes a woman who gave birth would give the umbilical cord to another woman who could not give birth. (FM: Z. S.) Some sources say that older women used to fry the umbilical cord with meat and feed it to an infertile woman (Argynbayev 1973: 63). Today these customs have disappeared or have been adjusted: in exceptional situations a woman who is having a hard time getting pregnant might borrow underwear from a woman who just gave birth.

When placing a child in a cradle, different goods such as *kurt*,[1] butter, sugar, candies, and silver money are passed through the hole in the cradle and distributed to children and women. Infertile women and young women who have not had children yet make a point of receiving these gifts. There is a tradition that when a child turns 40 days old, women who are not pregnant yet take the child's onesie. Apart from the above rituals, which are aimed at having children, bereaved parents would go to famous saints, spend the night and ask for a child, a custom that still takes place in some areas. When a pregnant woman wanted to have a boy, she had to put her husband's knife and trousers under her pillow. If she wanted a girl, she placed a red dress and jewellery (rings, bracelets, earrings) under her pillow.

From the moment a young wife realised that she was pregnant, she was treated with kindness and care. Kazakhs paid special attention to the firstborn child already during pregnancy. It is said that if the first child is born safely, the next children will also be safely delivered. Kazakhs forbid young brides from going out at night with their heads bare, walk alone to get water in the evenings or go to a house where someone had recently died. (FM: B. N.) If the husband was absent from the home overnight, the mother-in-law or sister-in-law stayed with the pregnant woman. Between the 19th and mid-20th centuries people believed that a pregnant woman was weak and that she could be surrounded by evil forces. Well-known ethnographer Halel Argynbayev (1973: 87) states that "in order to protect against the above-mentioned dangers, the bride's family hangs various weapons, whips, axes, wolf's mouths, eagle beaks"

around the home. Such scenes are also found among the Kazakhs of Central Asia. In addition, Kazakhs, especially in Uzbekistan, often fumigate the bride's room with adyraspan grass or hang it in the room (Kalshabayeva 2011: 290), a practice that is still common among the Kazakh people. The origins of these superstitions go back a long way, but these methods are still used to cast out demons. People also believe that someone who smells adyraspan would not get sick. In rural areas the mullah conducts prayers, and people wear a talisman sewn in a triangular shape (often called the arc) filled with salt, pepper, adyraspan, beads against the evil eye, and so on (ibid.: 295). People in rural areas still believe that this will protect the young bride from harm and demons.

When the bride got pregnant, her uncles and aunts say to her mother-in-law: "The bride's belly is full of white *airan*[2] and she has been blessed" (FM: Zh. K.). The mother-in-law then organises a small celebration, called *kursak shashu*. Guests bring different treats with the purpose finding among them the one that will please the pregnant lady. Kazakhs used to predict the child's gender according to the dish that the bride craves. People said that "women who crave the meat of wild animals, bears, tigers, and wolves give birth to boys, and they will become great heroes and thinkers" (FM: E. K.), while "if there is a craving for sweets, there will be a girl" (FM: A. Sh.).

Mother-in-laws covered the hem of the pregnant daughter-in-law's dress to prevent them from miscarriage. The bride would not hold any sharp object (knife, needles, scissors) because of the superstition that it could cause her child to be born prematurely (FM: M. K.). Around a month before giving birth, false contractions might begin. At this stage, the expectant mother does not have to work a lot, fearing that the umbilical cord could be wrapped around the baby's neck. According to belief if there is a girl in the womb, she is located on the left side of the abdomen, and a boy on the right (FM: Z. S.).

A pregnant woman who wants a boy does not eat the treats that she takes to someone's house from her own home as this would mean having a girl (FM: T. B.). A pregnant woman also does not cut her hair as this could reduce the happiness of the unborn child, or they might be born with disabilities, with short arms or legs (FM: U. A.). Kazakh families still perform all of these customs and rituals.

BIRTH CUSTOMS

When a woman started having contractions, the village women gathered in the house to perform various rituals to ease childbirth. With the aggravation of contractions, a rope was stretched out inside the house, the woman's hair was combed, all her buttons were unbuttoned and all chests and baskets in the room were opened. When contractions became more frequent, the mother-in-law started preparing a dish called *zharys kazan* from specially preserved meat in the house's cauldron. She also made tea and boiled milk. The women periodically heated a knife in the house's cauldron and said "will the black cauldron boil first, or will the woman give birth first". Thus, cooking *zharys kazan* encouraged the woman to have a quick delivery by 'competing' with the cauldron (Argynbayev1996: 58). A similar custom is also found in the Khakass. A woman in labour had her hair combed out, her dress hem torn, and all her chests and boxes opened (Butanayev 2014: 57). Today, when women give birth in hospitals, the mother-in-law still invites her neighbours and relatives to perform this custom.

From the end of the 19th century until the mid-20th a women giving birth were assisted by mothers with many children, who were considered to have 'lucky hands' (FM: N. M.). Kazakh women usually gave birth at home in a standing position.

Between the 19th and early 20th centuries, as the woman's contractions became more frequent, one or two children begin to pace around the woman in labour, saying "is he here? Is he here?" Shortly before the birth of the baby, the woman held onto the rope and knelt, two women supported her under the armpits, and the third woman held her belly hugging her, called *bel tartu* ('pushing the belly'). Ivan Kolbasenko (1890), who worked as a doctor on Kazakh territory in the 19th century, believed that the *bel tartu* method helped the mother give birth quickly. When pushing the belly did not help and labour became difficult, the women were evicted from the house and men entered because it was believed that there was a devil among the women. Villagers gathered around the house, shouting and shooting guns. Then a shaman was called. Difficulties in giving birth were explained through the concept of 'pressing' or 'eye blacking', that is, a demon was sitting on the woman's chest preventing childbirth. Other Turkic people also know of an evil force that harms women and children, called *alarvady* in Azerbaijan; other Turkic peoples call this character Alyss, Alyss, Albas, Almis, Alass, or Albas (Abdullayev 1995: 17), in addition to which an evil woman character also exists, called *kyrkbasmasy* ('red woman') (Alparslan and Demirel 2013: 47).

According to data collected from all over the country, until 1930–1940 it was common to invite a medicine man for a woman who was unable to give birth, believing that evil forces were hindering the birth. According to Toleubayev (1991: 213), the difference between shamans from the eastern and western regions of Kazakhstan, and the shamans of Central Asia and southern Kazakhstan, is mainly that the former call the spirits of the ancestors instead of Muslim saints. This may be due to the lesser influence of Islam on the western and the eastern regions of Kazakhstan bordering Russia and China. Vladimir Basilov (1971: 89) wrote about this, saying that "Kazakhs pray to saints and ancestors. They were mainly respected within a certain family group and representatives of this group usually went to 'their' holy ancestors for help." This process has continued to the present day. For example, women who have not been able to have a child or whose child is seriously ill still go to saints such as Yrgyzbai Doskanauly in East Kazakhstan and Ata Beket in West Kazakhstan to pray for a cure for their child (FM: T. R.).

According to our fieldwork in East Kazakhstan, when there is a difficult childbirth a woman might also be taken to a blacksmith's workshop to deliver (FM: A. Sh.) as the people of Central Asia believed that it was a sacred place; the objective "was to cleanse the body of a woman in labour from demons" (Toleubayev 1991: 66).

Another way to ease contractions was laying the pregnant woman on the carpet, while four people rocked her from four sides and sprayed cold water with ash and coal on her belly and back. Women knocked at the door, entered and said: "The people have moved, the enemy has arrived, what are you waiting for, hurry up." If young children and girls entered the house, elder people would tear the hem of their dresses. (FM: A. U.) According to Khakass customs, if a young girl (who was not married and had not given birth) came into the house of a woman in labour, someone would tear the hem of her dress. Women who were married but could not give birth or were infertile were not allowed to enter. These women were called 'closed hem' because of their infertility (Butanayev 2014: 57).

According to our informant Zhamby Akhmetova, when she could not give birth when she was young, someone brought soil from the cemetery and threw it three times on her face to cast out evil spirits. Her mother Kalisa Ibatova was a healer. In this region falling under the influence of the evil spirit is called having 'dark eyes'. When one woman was close to dying and her 'eyes got darker', Kalisa Ibatova read a prayer and gave her four spoons of black water to drink. (FM: A. Zh.)

To ease contractions of women in labour, sheep fat was thrown into the fire and Umai Ana was asked to help. Also known as Mother Umaiis, the God of prosperity and the continuer of the genus of the Turkic-speaking nations who inhabited the ancient Steppe, Umai Ana was also worshipped by Khakas, Kirghiz, Altaians, Tuvans, Shors and Turks. Umai was the protector of women, children and warriors, particularly among the ancient Turks. In the ancient Turkic language, *Umai* means 'the place of the child', or 'the womb of the mother'. In Yakut mythology, Umai's role is played by Aiyyhyt. Its name comes from the ancient Turkic word *ai* ('mother'). However, the term is pronounced 'imai' and means 'womb' in Altai and Western Buryats (Alekseyev 2008: 23). In her figure we can trace influences of pre-Islamic religious concepts such as fire worship. In the culture of the Turkic peoples Umai Ana was considered the patroness of young children and women in labour. However, the role of patroness of young children is today being forgotten (Akatayev1990: 85–92).

The Turkic peoples had their own understandings of the patrons of women. The Yakuts believed that Aiyyhyt would help both the woman in labour and the child. In their understanding, she leaves the house three days after the birth. There was a belief that the Teleuits' Mai-ene and Kachins' Umai-ene protected the child in the cradle. The Kumans believed that Umai-En protects people for the rest of their lives. Nikolay Alekseyev (2008: 266–267) believes that "despite such differences, these ethnic groups have a common origin – the cult of the patroness of women and children". Anatoliy Gogolev (1993: 492) also supports this idea.

In the 19th century if the placenta did not come out after the birth, then the western Kazakhs used to say the mother had 'caught a cold'. An article from 1878 about the Semipalatinsk Kazakhs says:

> In such cases, a woman puts on leather trousers and rides a horse with a guy, crossing mountains and steppes together. If the woman comes home alive from this, but loses consciousness, the Shaman will slap her face and say, "wake up and thank God". (P. 1878: 23)

POSTPARTUM CUSTOMS

In the late 19th and early 20th centuries as soon as the child was born, an elder sibling ran to the child's father and relatives in order to announce the good news and ask for a gift (*suyinshi*) (FM: A. U.; B. K. a; E. P.; Z. Sh.). If a gift was not given quickly, the child was allowed to steal someone's headdress and leave them bareheaded. To find out whether it was a boy or a girl, the relatives asked "horseman or embroiderer?" The answer "a shepherd *suyinshi* came" would indicate a boy, while "a horseman *suyinshi* came" would indicate a girl (FM: A. U.). Khakass prohibited announcing the child's

gender soon after birth because they believed that evil spirits could harm the child. Relatives and neighbours asked indirectly, "what is the catch? Was a marksman or a seamstress born?" Sometimes a boy was also referred to as duty because in Kazakhstan men are the taxpayers (Butanayev 2014: 57). As soon as child was born, the relatives wrapped him or her in the elders' headscarves to ensure long life. Today, as women give birth in hospitals, this custom is no longer performed.

In the 19th and early 20th centuries, after giving birth a woman's belly was wrapped, she was covered with a blanket and holy books were hung over her (P. 1878: 35). Some women stayed with the new mother, keeping her company for the first night, lighting candles to protect her from the devil in a custom called guarding. In the belief that the young woman and her new-born will attract evil forces, guarding first appeared in order to protect and secure the baby from demons. Over time, it became more of an entertaining party. Later, on the evening of the day the child was born, the village youth used to gather, sing songs and play various games until sunrise. Sometimes guarding lasted up to three days. Today, people do not guard a woman with a new-born child and only close relatives gather to have meals together.

Among the Kazakhs of East Kazakhstan there is a belief that if a woman gives birth in the moonlight when the moon is full, then it will be a girl, and if she gives birth when the new moon is waxing, then a boy will be born. Kazakhs associate the female name Tolganai with this belief (Toleubayev 1991: 121).

A sheep was slaughtered and a broth called *kalzha* was cooked for women who had just given birth. The difference between *kalzha* and food eaten every day is that it is sheep meat specially raised for the young mother and baby. The new mother was given *kalzha* until the child was 40 days old. Kazakhs believed that a woman who was given *kalzha* correctly would not lose her teeth and neither would her joints ache, rather, she would regain her strength quickly so as to be involved in household chores again. The neck of a sheep slaughtered for *kalzha* was given to a young mother, who had to take all the meat from the bone without using her teeth; a stick was then passed through the bone and it was hung on a wall. According to superstition, this would cause the child's neck to strengthen quickly. *Kalzha* was not to be eaten by men because if they did their hair would fall out. According to a saying, "a man has to taste an award, a woman has to taste a *kalzha*". If the women of the village did not get to try *kalzha* made from the head, they were allowed to try the spine, which would help women have a child soon. If they did not receive any *kalzha*, they would just sit and stare at the meat, saying something like "look at the humiliation…" (Zhunusov 1992: 21). All the meat of sheep slaughtered for *kalzha*, except the spine, should be eaten by the woman who gave birth by herself. Otherwise, her belly will not tighten quickly. In the past, she would not be able to get involved in nomadic household life so quickly. In the same way, the Altai Tolengids preserved the cervical spine of the *kalzha* sheep with the ritual so that "the neck will quickly strengthen" (Snesarev 1964: 52). Today, parents of the woman who just gave birth, bring her *kalzha* lamb. As soon as the woman gnaws a bone, they hang it on the wall.

After slaughtering sheep the blood is drained and fried with gut fat so that the waist of the woman will quickly strengthen (Shatynova 1979: 140).

In the past, the new-born was bathed in a foam of boiled *kalzha* meat. Then the umbilical cord was smeared with soap and greased with back fat, and the baby swad-

dled for protection. The umbilical cord was kept or sewn into the child's clothing as an amulet (FM: N. A.). This ritual was also present among the Altai Kazakhs (Konovalov 1986: 141). Then the baby was bathed in salted water to mature and strengthen his or her body (FM: S. A.), a custom that still exists in rural areas.

In the early 20th century, after the umbilical cord was cut, it was rubbed with a mixture of different herbs and fat. Wealthy Kazakhs used to sew shirts and blankets for their children, and poor ones used to wrap babies in very soft camel wool, similar to cotton. A shirt worn during the first 40 days was called a 'dog shirt'. It was sewn as soon as the child was born. After 40 days, the dog shirt was tied around a dog's neck in order that "the child [would] be as tough and strong as a dog" (FM: A. U.). Then the dog was fed. This custom does not exist today.

On the third day, the baby was placed in a cradle. On this day, villagers gathered and slaughtered sheep and rural women gathered to cook meat and brew tea. Placing a child in a cradle was trusted to a respected older woman with many children. After the woman equipped the cradle, she was given *kurt*, butter, *bauyrsak*,[3] sugar, candy and silver money brought in honour of the child. She then passed them through the hole in the cradle to another woman on the other side, who collected the items and distributed them to the children and women around. Then the cradle was purified with fire and the child placed in the cradle. (FM: T. S.) This custom persists to the present day.

According to our interviewees, when placing a child in a cradle seven items are attached to the cradle, a belt, an elder's headdress, a whip, a knife, a mirror, a comb, and a ring. While the child is sleeping, everything except the mirror, the comb and knife is removed. The rest is left so that the child will not be afraid. (FM: T. T.) The custom of placing a child into the cradle exists today with people placing a knife under the pillow to prevent child from being scared.

For the Kazakhs, who had a nomadic or semi-nomadic lifestyle, the comfort of the cradle was undeniable. Kolbasenko (1890: 36) discussed the advantages of the traditional Kazakh cradle. Its structure provides convenience for both parent and child because the mother can sit on a pillow or blanket placed in front of the bed, holding the cradle in front of her. The cradle is such that the woman can breastfeed her child even while riding a horse. Secondly, because of its structure, the area under the child will never be wet, there will be no bad smells and no sores, which are problems often encountered by sedentary people. A tube made from a thin sheep bone is attached to the cradle, through which the urine passes into a vessel made of clay, fired clay, copper or brass, with a little ash sprinkled at the bottom.

The cradle was passed from child to child, although a deceased child's cradle was never used, it was left at the cemetery instead.

In 19th and early 20th centuries, if a child did not survive, various rituals were performed to prevent bad luck in the future. For example, the next child born to the family would be breastfed by another young mother for the first three days.

> My mother gave birth to six daughters, but not of them survived. When I was born, they put me in a cradle and left me at the neighbours' three times and then took me back saying that they had forgotten me. I survived thanks to this. My father was named Akbuzau because all other children of his parents had died [a child was given an ugly name if any previous children had died]. These superstitions came true. (FM: A. M.)

Sometimes a new-born baby was 'sold' in such a situation. The child was taken off of the sign of the top of the door listing the occupants of the house, and the parents said three times that the child had been sold. 'Buyers' said "we have bought the child" three times, thereafter returning the child to the parents. Then the parents bought the child back, taking the child out of the door and letting him or her back in through another door. The buyers then became godparents of the child. (FM: A. U.) The Yakuts had a similar custom of 'kidnapping' a child. The closest relatives kidnapped the child without telling the parents and replaced him or her with a puppy or other animal. The stolen child was given to a woman who had many children and who would then return the child after two or three days (Belilovskiy 1894: 102). Typically, the child was wrapped in the skin of a fox or rabbit, tied to a rope and pulled through the chimney of the house. Such rituals were born out of the idea that demons cannot pass through a sign (such as the one over the entrance) or through a chimney. Buryats and Altaians also have similar rituals. For example, in Buryatia a child is kidnapped by poor relatives and returned at a certain time. These customs have today fallen into disuse.

Rituals such as those described above were born from the wish to mislead demons. People believed that if a child was sold, kidnapped, or replaced with a puppy, demons would not know where the child was and would take the puppy instead. During our fieldwork our interlocutors explained to us that in the early 20th century, if a woman's children died, as soon as the next child was born it was passed between nine women who had many children and the umbilical cord was cut by a man with an axe. If a woman did not have a son, a child was bathed by women who have many sons, and a woman with no children should imperceptibly step on the shadow of a mother with many children. (FM: E. P.; K. D.; T. G.; Y. B.)

Among the Khakassas, when a child did not survive, an old woman with many children was brought and the child was passed through her legs. Here, the transfer of a child through a woman's legs was associated with the image of birth, and thus the Khakassas believed they could mislead the demons who were chasing this family's children. (Toleubayev 1991: 73)

The Khakassas also believed that if two women give birth at the same time, one should not see the labour of the other because the child of the second woman would have scabies. If they did see each other, then after their children turned 40 days old, both women stood leaning back-to-back and offered a bowl of meal to each other in this position. This belief was called *kottestiru* (Katran 1996: 120).

40 days after childbirth, the ritual of bringing the baby out of the forties was performed by the most respected old woman of the village. 40 flatbreads were fried that day. Fresh water was brought to the house early in the morning, and 40 *kumalak*s (sheep dung) were collected and 40 coins or other objects were placed in it. The child was then bathed in the water to bring money and happiness in the future. The baby's hair and nails were cut and sewn into the child's clothes as an amulet. A ring, piece of tableware, silver ladle and other gifts were given to the person who bathed the child and cut the hair and nails. These customs are still performed today, although without placing the sheep dung in the bathing water. As mentioned above, the dog shirt custom was connected with the baby reaching the age of 40 days. The dog shirt was tied around the dog's neck with the hope that the child would become as tough and strong as a dog or that all the danger would be transferred from the baby to the dog (Argynbayev 1973:

75). Turkish people also perform a ritual when a child turns 40 days old according to which they mix 40 spoons of water with 40 pieces of wheat grain. Then they pour the water on the head of the child. (Alparslan and Demirel 2013: 47) The Zhetsu region also had customs called 'tail porridge' and 'liver feet', which were performed when a child began to crawl and sit, although these customs did not exist in East Kazakhstan.

When a child began to walk, another custom called 'cutting the fetters' (*tusaukesu*) was performed. This ritual stemmed from the desire for the baby to walk quickly after standing upright. The child's legs were tied with string, and a bowl of food was placed on either side of the child's legs. This thread was cut with a knife or razor by a respectable village woman with many children. She threw the cut thread out of the house. For performing this custom, the woman who cut the thread was given a gift. After that, meat was cooked to serve to all guests. After the meal, adults give blessings and wishes of longevity, health, happiness and wealth to the child. (FM: A. U.) Kazakh people give a special value to food, seeing it as a symbol of prosperity, abundance, and wealth. Cutting the fetters symbolises the baby's first steps in life beginning with good food and kindness in order that he or she live in prosperity and wealth. Cutting the threads is the beginning of a person's life journey. Cutting the fetters is also found in other nations, for example, the Kyrgyz perform a custom called *tushoo keschi toi* in Kyrgyz or *tusaukesu* in Kazakh (Abramzon 1949: 39).

Another important celebration was held when a boy turned three years old. The child was put on a horse with a saddle (FM: B. N.). Due to the plight of the poor they might put their sons on a horse at the age of four or five. On this day, a cow was slaughtered and village inhabitants gathered in the house. Women brought dairy products, threw them at the entrance of the house and gave good wishes, such as "congratulations on your joy". (FM: E. K.) After that, the women were placed in a separate house from the men and the food was served. After dinner everyone went out to see a horse race, after which the men left and only the women and the most respected people of the village remained. Then the women took the child out of the house and the most respected elder put the child on a horse with a young man. They rode around the entire village with the people of the village giving the boy gifts. After that, when the village moved to another place, the child would ride a separate horse without his mother. (FM: N. M.) Today, people in rural areas still have the custom of putting a child on a saddle. However, the child no longer rides around the village as was previously the case, and the custom is now performed among close relatives only.

Usually, relatives choose a foal that is the same age as the child so that they can grow up together. By the time the child is fit to ride the horse, the horse is tame and like a pet. The horse is known as *basire*.[4] The *basire* is looked after as much as the child and it is a good sign if *basire* is a fast paced horse. Today, the custom of dedicating a horse to the child exists only in rural areas.

Kazakhs were very wary of the evil eye and knew different ways to protect children from harm. When a child was jinxed, they expelled the evil eye with the help of an insole from the right shoe of the person who had jinxed the child: they cut off part of the insole and performed a healing ritual, wrapping it around the child.

> When my son was three years old, he was jinxed when we were visiting relatives. When we got home, my son got very sick. My husband went and cut off the ear of a

sheep belonging to that house and burned it, then he put it in warm water and later he bathed our son in that water. (FM: U. T.)

In the 19th and early 20th centuries, when a child got sick a shaman or doctor was called. The shaman gently played the *kobyz*, a Kazakh musical instrument. If a child had a stomach ache, the shaman chewed cloves or garlic and sprayed it on the child; after slaughtering a black sheep, he beat the patient with its lungs. If the doctor noticed a pulse on the child's forehead and veins, and decided that the child was sick from the mother's milk, then the mother did not eat for three days and was fed with arsenic (Oserov and Estayev 1992: 59).

Kazakhs call rickets 'dog disease' or 'dog touch' because its cause is believed to be related to dogs. In East Kazakhstan it is believed that rickets can be caused by a jinx. When a person with a dog meets a child, the disease can be transmitted. The disease was treated by immersion in water with a dog's skull, or by rolling a child on the ground where a dog had died. The child was not supposed to look back when leaving that place. Some hung the dried skull of a dog on the right side of the door. (FM: N. A.)

Ethnographers who visited the Kazakh steppes in the 19th and early 20th centuries and became acquainted with its life, wrote with great surprise that the children of nomadic Kazakhs rarely suffer from abdominal diseases (Belilovskiy 1894: 101). This was due to the strict attitude to the cleanliness of the child and the food that the child eats.

Adoption in the absence of a child is a long-standing tradition and is still common in Kazakh society, with a childless couple often adopting the child of a close relative. The adoptive parents invite the village elders and relatives to a celebration to receive blessings. On that day, the child holds the femur of a cow in his or her hand, and both sides make a public promise. Giving the femur to the child in front of the whole village means that the adoptive parents see that child as their own, recognises him or her as their heir, and determines the mutual gratitude of both parties.

CONCLUSION

The elements of traditional culture related to pregnant women, childbirth and taking care of small children continue in the customs and rituals of the Kazakhs. All the customs described above were meant to ensure the health and well-being of the child and family. In spite of the fact that many rituals are associated with magical elements, they have an effective basis. A variety of customs and traditions related to the child strengthen the connection of the child and the mother with community.

Rituals related to childbirth were a transitional period for both woman and child, marking the gradual transition of the child from nature to culture (placing the child in a cradle, giving him or her name, circumcision, cutting of hair, cutting threads).

Improvement in healthcare institutions led to traditional methods of childbirth fading away. The godmother tradition has experienced some changes. In the past, the godmother used to take care of a woman after her labour and used to help her until the child turned 40 days old. Today, the godmother's responsibility is limited to preparing a present for the child. There is no need to acquire help from a mullah if there are complications during labour.

Many of the traditional customs concerning the child have survived to this day and have not lost their importance. Many families perform the custom of unlocking locks and untying a knot when a woman starts having contractions. Among respondents in rural areas, a high degree of use of national, religious and ritual elements of ethnic culture was found.

In child-related rituals, special attention is paid to the first stage of childhood, which involves the use of traditional methods of medicine to preserve the health of the child and mother, as well as magical methods that protect against the evil eye and jinxes. We can see that some of the customs have spread widely in rural areas. For example, people believe that applying ashes to the forehead of the child, a bead with the image of eyes hung on a child, attaching owl feather jewellery to the headdress allegedly protects the child from evil. Customs such as 'clearing' a child who has been jinxed, using salt, fire, or something belonging to the person who jinxed the child are still popular. The traditions of the Islamic religion, such as circumcision, are also preserved, in addition to which relatives of the new mother bring the baby a cradle and a sheep from which to make *kalzha*. The tradition of adoption also exists, but has undergone changes: today parents do not agree to give the child to a relative for adoption, adoption from orphanages is more common.

Comparing child-related customs with other Turkic-speaking peoples, we found that there were many similarities (the *azan*, naming the child, cutting the hair, etc.), especially with the Siberian peoples (elements of shamanism, totem animal worship, etc.).

The majority of Kazakh traditional customs related to women, childbirth and baby care have lost their protective meaning and obtained instead festive meanings. The preservation of the main elements of these customs shows the importance of the child's transition from one age category to the next, as well as the importance of the child's physiological and psychological changes for the family and relatives.

NOTES

1 *Kurt* is a national dish made of milk. To make it kefir is boiled, from which fat is removed, and salt is added to the mixture. The resulting kefir is placed in a cloth bag and hung in the shade for several days.

2 *Airan* is sour milk.

3 *Bauyrsak* is a traditional dish in which wheat flour is fermented, prepared in various forms, and cooked in oil.

4 When a boy is born in a Kazakh family, a foal or a newborn camel born on those days is given to the baby. According to Kazakh belief, the future of the child is closely related to the *basire* devoted to that child. Therefore, it is not ridden or sold.

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FM: fieldwork materials collected by the authors between 2015 and 2019. The materials are stored in the personal archives of the authors.

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