

# Rituals of Birth among the Adyghes

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## Abstract

Rituals of childbirth make up an important part of life in traditional Adyghe society. The author provides a detailed description of these rituals, paying special attention not only to the birth itself, but also to the rituals and ceremonies practiced during the entire period of pregnancy, the behaviour of the mother-to-be, and her social status before and after the birth in the house of her husband. In a number of cases original ritual songs with translation are also included. The research is predominantly based on field-records of the author and archive materials.

Of all the rituals associated with childhood in this survey, only some of them are practiced now, though sporadically. Others have been consigned to oblivion.

## Keywords

Adyghes, Birth Rituals, Naming, Ritual Songs, *Materia Magica*, Evil Eye, Apotropaic Means

The Adyghes have always considered a house full of newborn children to be the happiest one. They say: *Сабый зэрымыс унэм ихи макъэ илукъырэн*, lit. "One can never hear laughter in a house where there are no children".

Even during marriage ceremonies, special rituals were performed that were believed to have a positive influence on the fertility of women, on the protection of the pregnancy and securing a successful delivery. The Adyghes always hoped for the newly-wed couple to have many children. When showering the bride with grains, they uttered: *Коцыцэ нэнчъ шъао*, lit. "May you have as many sons as there are grains here", or *Цыфэу цыгэмэ агъуамбэ нэнчъэу, шъобагъу, ар имыкъурэмэ, уашъом ит жъуагъом фэдиз горэху*, lit. "Let your kin (family) multiply as many as there are fingers on the hands of all people, and in case it is not enough, let them add as many as there are stars in the sky!". When the young bride first stepped into her new

house, she was given a baby-boy to hold. This ritual was believed to contribute to the birth of male infants; it was also usual to place her on a goat-skin rug, symbolising fertility, etc.<sup>1</sup> Childlessness was a great misery for the entire family and caused psychological discomfort to the spouses.

Sterility was believed to be connected with supernatural powers haunting a woman's body, rather than biology. In the case of an illness, healers or midwives were invited "to cure" the patient by means of various concoctions and massages.

To exorcise evil spirits from a sterile woman's body, the ritual of "jumping over the fire" (*мэшлoель*) was performed. Only the closest friends and relatives, who were genuinely interested in the birth of a child, were invited to take part. The preparations for this ritual<sup>2</sup> lasted seven weeks and only on the Wednesday of the eighth week did people gather. During this time, the bride would wash herself with holy water (*дыуахъынс*) then pour it under a tree, not far from the place where the ritual was to take place. On the appointed day, people, attired in rags, made a fire in a holy grove. They believed that dirty garments could scare away the evil powers. Before the bride was lead outdoors to the fire, she was kept in a house with another woman, usually a mother of many children. Several males guarded them. The other woman danced and jogged thus trying to "shake off" evil spirits from the skirt of the bride. After the male guards had fired a number of gunshot rounds into the air, they went out, arm-in-arm, bride's face covered with a veil. In this procession, the young woman was showered with grains. Along the path, they stopped to pay tribute to Тхагаledž (*Тхагагъэлыдж*), the deity of fertility,<sup>3</sup> saying: *ЗэкIэ цыIэр зэлъIоу, зыми емылъIужъырэр, тыгъэун тиунагъокIэ*, lit. "You, who everyone turns to, but who never asks for help, bestow happiness upon our family". The women accompanying the bride sang:

*Шъуз мьлфэ нахъи пчен лфэн;  
Типчэн тилъанIэ, тилъэпIэн Iомэ мэбагъо;  
Нысэр тилъэпIэцт энэкъокъумэ пчэным.  
Зымыгъэнэкъуакъорэр хэта?*

<sup>1</sup> Recorded from Khajet Khamkhatu, 80 years old.

<sup>2</sup> It is described in a scholarly work for the first time. On family rituals among the Adyghes, see in general Džandar 1991.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. "Тхагаledž", bei den Ost-tscherkessen Gottheit (*tha*), die über die Fruchtbarkeit herrscht" (Dumézil 1986: 52). On the pantheon of the Adyghes, see Khanakhu 2002: 112-126.

*Мыцынэрэмэ кьыхэрэки,  
Мэцынэмэ цэрэс!  
Машлом тынэхьашт.*

A childing she-goat with yield is better than a childless woman;  
Our goat is dear to us, as it gives goatlings to us;  
Our bride will be loved only if she doesn't yield less than the goat  
in fertility.

And who hinders it?  
If it is not afraid, let it come out,  
And if it is afraid, let it stay sitting!  
We are going into the fire.<sup>4</sup>

The supernatural being was thereby warned that it would be burnt to ashes in the fire and was asked to leave the body of the young woman. The bride approached the fire and then jumped without hesitation over it. A successful jump signified the complete purge of her body of the evil spirits. It was considered a bad omen if flames of fire reached her garments. After this ritual, tables were set for feasts, special games were organised, and all the participants sang and danced.

The young woman would reside in her husband's house for about nine months after this ritual. If she did not get pregnant during this period, the family members said in her presence: "The holy tree is withering", and then the mother-in-law returned the bride's parents' presents through a trusted person. This messenger was also to tell the bride's parents to take her home. In some cases, if the young woman agreed on the remarriage of her husband, she was allowed to stay in his house. The reason for such a decision was connected with the necessity of returning the *kalym*, "bride-price" (Meretukov 1977: 49).

The ritual of purgation with fire was widespread among the peoples of the region (Čursin 1956: 66; Ivanova 1983; Turceladze 1866). The Tatars, like the Adyghes, also made pregnant women jump over the fire, should childbirth be difficult. This was also a common practice amongst the Azerbaijanis (SMOMPK 1894, XX/1: 95).

#### PREGNANCY

When a young woman for the first time could say with certainty that she would soon become a mother, she was very proud of that, because only after the birth of her first child did she enter the "estate of

<sup>4</sup> Recorded from the same informant (see fn. 1).

women". Pregnancy was the only means for a young bride to become a full member of her husband's family. Despite the fact that the news of the coming child was welcomed by everyone, pregnant woman tried to avoid the elders and keep out of their sight. Married sisters-in-law were the first to learn about her condition. The mother-in-law when hearing the news from the others, said: *Тиньисэ зыгорэ илажсьа?*, lit. "Our daughter-in-law has something ahead, hasn't she?".

In the past, the Abkhazians also concealed pregnancy from the elders in the house, especially from the parents-in-law (Dbar 1985). Among both the Adyghe and Abkhazians, women did not visit their parents during the last months of pregnancy.

The preparations for the birth of a child began from the very beginning of pregnancy, but clothes or nappies were never stored in advance. Family members always treated the pregnant woman well, released her from daily chores, did not allow her to carry heavy objects, etc. Before the delivery, the woman had to follow a number of prohibitions in order to give birth to a healthy child.

To prevent the pregnant woman from evil spirits, she was not allowed to go to the cemetery as then the child would fall into a state of unconsciousness. The pregnant woman was not to blow out a fire, as the child would then die from fire. The pregnant woman was not to go outdoors after sunset, as an evil spirit would meet her and harm her. The pregnant woman was not to sit down on a chest or a stone, as she would have a miscarriage. The pregnant woman was not to kill snakes, as the child would be born dumb. The pregnant woman was not to touch a red thing with her breast, as the child would be born with a red forehead. The pregnant mother was not to drink water from a large vessel, as the child would be too thin. The pregnant mother was not to put a hen on top of eggs to hatch them, as it was believed that either the woman would raise a child or the hen, but not both.

The expectant mother followed some food taboos as well: she did not eat the stomach of a bird, as the child would be born with blue lips. She did not eat fish, as the child would snuffle. She would avoid wings of a bird, as not to have a daughter. She would not eat the legs of a bird, as the child would have cold hands and feet. She would avoid the neck of a bird, otherwise the child's head would be wobbly. She would avoid adnate fruits, as the risk of conjoined twins becomes possible. She would avoid burnt porridge, so that the baby would not have moles on his/her crown (Archive, File 1/137: 2; Smirnova 1968: 111). All these prohibitions clearly reflected the superstitions of the traditional Adyghe society.

Adyghe divided pregnancy into three periods. During the first trimester, the relatives did not talk directly about the pregnant woman, so as to avoid evil spirits, and anytime when mentioning her, they said: *Блхырэр кьезэгьырэн* (lit. “food doesn’t show on her”). The second period started from the moment her belly became distinguished and was called *ынкъ фитэн—зэпкъаджэ* (lit. “can’t handle her own body”). The third trimester was marked by the difficulty to walk for the pregnant woman and was called *лэрмышь* (“heavy”; lit. “legs are not able to carry her”).

If spouses wanted a son, they hung a man’s hat over the wife’s bed and put a knife under her pillow from the very beginning of the pregnancy.

There were several methods for foretelling the baby’s gender applied by the young woman’s in-laws. After the young woman’s relatives gathered in the house, they scared the expecting bride telling her that her hands were dirty. The latter, being embarrassed, unconsciously, would raise them. If the hands appeared palms up, a baby-girl was to be born, palms down was a sign that she expected a boy child. One of the participants immediately imparted the happy news to the father-to-be and received a present from him. This ritual is still practised in some *auls* (“villages”).

The gender of the baby was also determined by the shape of a mother’s belly: a round belly slightly hanging down designated that a boy was to be born, a tapered belly indicated for a girl.<sup>5</sup>

#### RITUALS OF CHILDBIRTH

According to the Adyghe tradition, the delivery had to occur in the house of the husband, in a room specially arranged for that purpose, but not in the *унэшхо* (“the big room”), occupied by the parents of the husband (Meretukov 1977: 51). This tradition was common among many peoples of the region. For example, among Khevsurs and Pshavs, during the last days of pregnancy a woman would move to a hovel called *sačexi*, specially built by other women some distance from the village (Čursin 1913: 95). Adyghe men, including the husband, would leave the house and return only several days after the delivery, in order not to impede

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<sup>5</sup> Guesswork according to the shape of the belly was widespread among many peoples. Uspenskij (1895: 71-72) says that the inhabitants of the Tula Province believed “if the pregnant woman puts on weight, then she will give birth to a daughter, but if her belly is tapered (spike-like), then she expects a son”.

the parturient woman. The custom of leaving the house was a common practice among the Caucasian peoples in general (Basaeva 1976: 38; Ga-džieva 1961: 280).

The mother-in-law, being occupied with housework, would not usually participate in the process of delivery. Other women took care of the woman in childbirth. A midwife was often invited. In Kabarda they are called *мамыку*, among the Shapsugs—*хъуишъэппэс*, or *кIэлаиит*, Circasians call them *дыгур*. Another term for “midwife” is *дае*, which occurs mainly in the ritual songs.

It was the midwife or a skilful female stranger, but not a relative that assisted in the actual delivery. Family members kindled a fire on the threshold of the house and kept it alit until dawn, as a purifying power (Archive, *ibid.*). This custom is also observed among other peoples of the region. In Georgia, for instance, the fire is kept burning in the hearth all night in order to keep bloodthirsty *Ali*<sup>6</sup> and other evil spirits away from the woman in labour (Čursin, *ibid.*). The inhabitants of the Kuban valley also resorted to the helpful power of fire—in the house, where a child was born, a candle stayed lit until the day of the baby’s christening (SMOMPK 1887, VI/II: 162-163). Abkhazians also kept the hearth’s fire burning during the childbirth (Dbar 1985: 11).

Adyghe women delivered their children on straw or felt, but more often straw bedding was used. Straw was believed to have magical characteristics, bringing prosperity to the child’s future well-being. For this reason, the bride was showered with straw on entering her new house (Archive, *ibid.*). Magical beliefs related to straw can be found among other ethnicities as well. In Guria, it was obligatory for woman to deliver the child on the ground laid with straw; Ukrainians used to cover the road where a wedding procession was to pass with straw (Sumcov 1881: 185), etc.

According to Adyghe beliefs, startling the pregnant woman would accelerate the delivery. For this reason *мамыку* sang a special song when entering her room:

*Хыр къиугъ,  
Дээр къэсыгъ,  
Ущымыс!  
Умышъхъах!  
Тигъогу клахы о умыш!*

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<sup>6</sup> On this demoness, the mortal enemy of women in labour and newborn babies, called also *Āl*, *Almasti*, *Albasti*, etc. in various Near Eastern and Central Asian traditions, see in detail Asatrian 2001.

The sea has overflowed the shores,  
 The army has come,  
 Don't sit down!  
 Don't be lazy!  
 Don't delay our way! (Archive, *ibid.*).

There were a number of taboos to be observed during the childbirth. It was believed that the less people knew about the childbirth, the easier it would be. In the case of a difficult delivery, some rites were performed, for instance the woman was given water from her husband's shoe in order to induce vomiting.

Great attention was paid to accelerating the delivery through slackening, loosening and opening common objects. Thus hair left unplaited, scissors left open, along with chests and cabinets were all believed to have magical powers to induce a quicker delivery. The necks and hems of women's garments were torn by women present during the delivery. All this was due to their belief that tight things impeded the delivery: *Мыхэр псынклэу зэрээлутхыгъэу, уилоф псынклэ тхъа еш!*, lit. "Let God make your affairs as fast as we opened these things!" (Archive, *ibid.*). The Cossacks used to unplait the expecting mother's hair, unbind all knots on her clothes, unlock all doors and unsheathe all the knives, daggers, and sabres in the house (SMOMPK 1893, XVI/II: 4-5). This ritual was customary for the Kuban valley dwellers (SMOMPK 1887, VI/II: 161). In Kakhetia, women, when entering the room where a child was to be born, loosened up the belts of their dresses, saying: "Let your waist open up the way I untie my belt!" (Čursin 1913: 99) and then opened all the doors in the house (Solov'eva 1982).

There are other known rites aimed at protecting the woman in labour and the infant from evil forces. Adyghes lined the ground of the room, where the birth was taking place, and tied the woman's neck with a towel. She was also to put on her husband's belt. Iron objects were put under her pillow. Iron objects were preferred as presents, because they were believed to act against devilry. Metal goods have served as guarding amulets among many peoples. Armenians used to put daggers, scissors or simply pieces of steel under the pillow of the newborn child (SMOMPK 1898, XXV/II: 135).

In the *aul* of *ЩэхэкIэиуху* (*Bol'soj Kimčaj*) there lived a woman called *ГьукIэгьуащ*, who possessed a magical dagger that helped in quick delivery (Archive, File 1/137: 12). She washed her dagger in water and then gave the rinsed water to the labouring woman to drink. The newborn was also bathed in that water.

The head of the woman in labour was always covered with a scarf, as it was believed that flowing hair scared away guardian angels from facilitating delivery.

If a woman could not deliver for several days and her husband was staying with relatives, a group of women were sent for him. Returning, he would enter his wife's room, stamp his foot and say: *Къыостыгъа-гъэр къысэтыжъ*, lit. "Return me the thing I have given to you!". The wife, being frightened, would quickly deliver the baby (Archive, File 1/137: 8).

At times of prolonged delivery, a special woman was invited, who had freed a frog from a snake. She was to say: "Disjoin as quickly as I separated the snake from the frog" (ibid.: 2). This rite existed among Georgians (Solov'ëva 1982: 10) and Abkhazians (Dbar 1985: 10). In other cases, a woman with webbed fingers was invited. She had to step over the pregnant woman. Another custom was for the mother-in-law to gather all the pregnant women of the village, and they would go together, barefoot, with flowing hair and unbuttoned dresses, to the holy tree and sing a song requesting the "deity of soul", *Psatxa*:<sup>7</sup>

*Ти Псатхъа, о мафа!*  
*Тпсэ къэгъан, о мафа!*  
*Тпсэ къэгъан, о мафа!*  
*Ти Псатхъа, о мафа!*

Oh, our *Psatxa*, oh, our kindest!  
 Keep our soul, oh, kindest!  
 Keep our soul, oh, kindest!  
 Oh, our *Psatxa*, oh, our kindest!.

It should be noted that people more often turned to *Psatxa*, when the matter concerned children, diseases, and brides (Šortanov 1982: 42). These songs were believed to gain the favour of the "deity of soul". His veneration was especially prominent if the time of performing the ritual coincided with the birth of the baby.<sup>8</sup>

There existed another custom to ease a difficult delivery. One of the women would stand on the threshold of the house and brandish a lash, saying: "As wind, as water!", *Жъым фэдэу, псым фэдэу!* She called on

<sup>7</sup> Cf. "*Psatxe*, by den ost-Tscherkessen Gott (*tħa*) des Lebens (*pse* = 'Seele, Leben')" (Dumézil 1986: 46).

<sup>8</sup> Recorded from Tlif Doletkhan, 70 years old.

the pregnant woman to deliver the baby as quickly as both wind and water flow.<sup>9</sup>

If the baby opened its eyes immediately after birth, it was believed that the child would grow up healthy, with good manners and intelligence. If the child was born in the state of faintness, the baby was placed under a copper basin. The basin was then banged in order to “resuscitate” the child (Meretukov 1977: 53).

As soon as the baby was born, they would cut a lock from its hair and scorch it. The mother and the child would take a sniff. This action, supposedly, protected the child from fire.

It was a good omen if the baby-boy looked like his mother and if the girl resembled her father. Russians, especially the inhabitants of Tula province, also have a similar outlook (Uspenskij 1895: 77).

Adyghes prescribed a great magical power to the “shirt” in which sometimes the babies were born. The “shirt” was preserved and given to the child, when it grew older. The “shirt” was believed to protect the child (Kalmykov 1955). Adyghes and Kabardins used to bury the “shirt” as a symbol of a happy life.

#### THE FIRST YEAR OF LIFE

Immediately after birth, the midwife bathed the infant. Later the child was not to be bathed on the day of the week he was born. Following this period, the child was bathed in cold water mixed with ashes, so the baby would grow up strong and healthy. He was also bathed in water, which had been previously used to rinse iron objects and expensive gold items. This practice designated a long and happy life for the newborn child. The water, in which the infant was first bathed, the grandmother then poured in a “clear place”, far from people. Georgians also, when bathing the newborn son, placed a weapon, like a dagger or a revolver, in the water; in the case of a daughter, they placed scissors or other household implements (Čursin 1913: 116).

Adyghes wrapped the baby into soft nappies, which had previously been used, and covered the baby with a quilt to keep the child warm (Archive, File 1-137: 1).

After cutting the umbilical cord, the lips and cheeks of the child were marked with it. This rite was accompanied with the appropriate wishes of a prosperous appearance.

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<sup>9</sup> Recorded from the same informant (see previous fn.).

*БШунэ пльыжъэу,  
Бнэгушъхъэ шэпльэу тхъа ешI.*

Let God make your lips red and your cheeks rose (ibid.: 2).

The umbilical cord was puttied in the wall. If it took too long to dry, it was believed that the child would have a difficult life.

For many people the umbilical cord is believed to have a sacral influence on the life of the child. The Azerbaijanis, when a son was born, buried his cord in a stable or in the yard of a mosque, so that he “loved cattle” or “learned to read and write”. The daughter’s cord was buried near the entrance of the house, so that she “didn’t go far from the ancestral home” (Džafarzade/Babaeva/Atakišieva 1962: 139).

The first person that saw the newborn was to tie a white band, made of chambray, thus foretelling him a long life:

*БжакIэрэ ыпакIэрэ,  
Бшъхъацрэ ынапцэрэ  
Мыщ фэдэ охъуфэ ерэгъашI!*

“Let [him] live until the time when his beard and moustache,  
Hair and eyebrows, all become white,  
As this fabric is [white]!” (SMOMPK 1892, XIX/II: 180).

After the delivery, the mother and the child were left alone to rest. In order to regain her vigour, to produce milk and to restore blood loss, the woman ate fattening food, drank milk, and *ézezs* with cornel water or *zerdžeps* with arrow-wood water (Arcive, File 1/137: 2).

The first forty days after childbirth, the woman did not leave her bedroom as she was considered “impure”. She was not allowed to touch kitchen utensils or prepare food. During these days, the elder members of the family, especially the mother-in-law and the sister-in-laws, took care of her and the child. No one was allowed to enter their room after sunset for fear that evil spirits might also invade the room. In case another had to enter the room, they were to lay ashes on the threshold. In general, ashes were used as a safe-guarding method against children’s diseases and the evil eye (Kalmykov 1982: 174). Shoes were also left on the threshold and two nails were pinned there. They believed that with the help of these precautions the visitor left his soul, as well as the evil spirits wandering with it, outdoors, thus protecting the baby from any harm.

People visiting the newborn boy placed a dagger or knife near the child; in case of a girl, they placed needles, thread, and scissors. This ritual was believed to make the boy grow up to be a brave warrior and help the girl to become clever with the needle (Smirnova 1968: 114).

The first 10-15 days after delivery (when, according to Adyghe superstitions, the evil spirits were particularly active) were considered the most dangerous time for the life of the woman and the child. This apprehension can be explained by the high mortality rate during these days. For this reason, every family conducted special rituals aimed at protecting the child and mother. Initially, the entire house and yard were sulphurated. Children's accessories were never left outdoors after sunset as to protect the baby from evil spirits. Every day the clothes of the baby were purified from evil spirits by shaking them over a fire.

The babies among the Shapsugs were dressed three months after the birth. Other Adyghe tribes, however, clothed the child within three days after the birth. According to their beliefs, the baby was bestowed with happiness during the first three days after his birth, and in the case that he did not have clothes, there would be nowhere to place his happiness. Clothing was made of an already-used fabric and was called *цыгъо джан* ("mouse's clothing"): in order not to bewitch the child, they compared him with a mouse. They did not sew the garments, believing that it would shorten the baby's life. Russians also followed this prohibition for the same reason (Anikin/Kruglov 1983: 67). Only the mother or grandmother could make the baby's first clothing. As they sewed, they murmured: *Мы шэжыр зэрэдахэу, зэрэпсаоу ыгъэшлагъэм фэдишгъэ ерэгъаишI мыр джанэ зыфэтишIырэм*, lit. "Let the one who this clothing is made for, live hundreds of times longer than this fabric and preserve his beauty and strength!" (Archiv, *ibid.*). In the meanwhile, they did not mention whom exactly that garment was made for, in order not to attract evil spirits' attention.

In aristocratic families, the family *tamga* ("emblem") was cut off and sewed on the clothes of the baby, where it could be seen by all. The honour to sew the emblem was granted to the eldest woman in the family<sup>10</sup> or to the midwife. This act was accompanied with a song:

*Дае, даер, дае Iанэр, сэ сикIалэм фэмафа!  
 Мэфэ лъанIэм идэхэгъум сэ сикIалэр къэхъугъи!  
 ЛэшIэгъуишгъэ кIэлэ мафэм егъаишI!  
 Мэфэ лъанIэр лэшIэгъуишгъэм  
 Лъэрэзэхэу тиунагъо къытферэхъ.*

<sup>10</sup> Recorded from Kadyrkhan Kobleva, a Shapsug woman, 56 years old.

*Dae* (“midwife”), *dae*, let your fingers be lucky for my boy!  
 On a beautiful and holy day my boy was born!  
 Let the happy child live hundreds of ages!  
 Let this holy day visit our family for hundreds of years!<sup>11</sup>

In the times when the Adyghes did not have a written language, they remembered birthdays by the days of the weeks or the months, by seasons or some memorable events.

If a child was born following the death of a prominent man, this was seen as a great omen: in the place of an extinguished star appeared a new one, that of the newborn child.<sup>12</sup>

The day, month and weather conditions were also believed to have a significant influence on the destiny of the child. It was an auspicious sign if the child was born in the new moon, as it meant that he would grow up as fast as the moon does.

It was a special delight for the relatives to learn about the birth of a child. The first one that conveyed the happy news was given *рушьяп-кIэ*, “a pay for the joyful news”, either in money or in gold and silver items (Kiržinov 1975).

The first bathing of the baby, naming, the placing it within the cradle, the first visit by the neighbours and relatives to see the child (*čalyapl'*), appearance of the first tooth, the first haircut, nail paring, and the first step were long-awaited events, celebrated with special rites and songs.

Naming of the baby was an important happening as all future ups and downs in the life of a human being were connected with its name. More often it was the paternal grandparents that gave the name to the child. If children died often in the family, the newborn baby was called *Уцужъыкыу* (“the remained boy”), so that his name could serve as a talisman. If only daughters were born in the family, the latest daughter was named *Шыгъотыжъ* (“the one who found a brother”) (Meretukov 1977: 61). In the case of numerous miscarriages or infant deaths, the parents would change the place of childbirth and immediately take the next infant to a smithy, where the blacksmith bathed him in the same water in which iron objects had been chilled. After this procedure, the blacksmith gave a name to the baby connected with smithy and farriery, like *Гъучыпс* (“Iron spirit”), or *Кыщыкыу* (“Son of smithy”), etc. (Gadagatl' 1968: 196, fn. 12).

<sup>11</sup> Recorded from Shakhidet Naibova, 72 years old.

<sup>12</sup> Recorded from Tlekhaduk Khajetkhan.

If a child got ill often, the Adyghes changed his name every time, and in the end maintained that name, which gave convalescence to the child.

According to the Adyghes tradition, male infants were named after their deceased grandfathers and females after their grandmothers or other beautiful and happy women. Very often strangers and not parents would decide the baby's name. In aristocratic society, the one who named a baby, also sent him an arrow with white feathers, which was fastened to the cradle of the baby (Xan-Girej 1978: 275).

There were cases that all the villagers participated in the naming process and the final choice for the name was arrived at through consensus of all. Usually a name, especially a Muslim one, like Ibrahim, Mahmud, Yusuf, etc., was suggested by a *mullah*. The one who named the baby was to present him with a shirt. Often, in addition to the name chosen by the villagers, parents gave the baby their own preferred name as well. A mother would never call her child by its given name, so as not to outwardly display kind feelings towards him (cf. Stal' 1900: 116). Instead, she used other nicknames, according to various qualities, like *Нэмлaбгъу* ("Broad-fronted"), *Нэкъар* ("Brown-eyed"), *Цыкы* ("Little"), etc.

Special objects and symbols were used to notify people about the birth of a child. A red flag was hoisted on the house where a male infant was born, symbolising steadfastness; a multicoloured flag, a sign for beauty, was hoisted when a girl was born. When seeing a flag, people would visit and congratulate the grandparents.

Boy infants were more desirable in the Adyghes society. Boys were considered the heirs of the family legacy. In addition hereditary family landholdings could only be conferred upon male heirs. *КIалэр лaкъo, ухъумакIу, пьъашьэр хъакIэш икIыжьыцт*—"A boy child is the keeper of the family, while a girl is a guest, and she will leave as a guest". This was the reason that the birth of the boy was celebrated with great exuberance. Everyone in the village would become aware of the happy event as gunshots would be fired in the air. To celebrate the occasion a tree was planted and family feasts were organised (Archive, File 1/37: 1).

One of these festive occasions was called *къoекIэрышI*, "tying up a cheese" (see in detail Mafedzev 1979). It was performed on the occasion of the birth of a male infant. When the mother-in-law learned about the pregnancy of her daughter-in-law, she prepared the so-called red cheese (i.e. "smoked cheese"). For the feast, people gathered on the third day after delivery. In wintertime, the rite was performed in a big

room; during summertime people gathered in the yard, near a tree. People of all ages attended the gathering, but only youths directly participated.

Cheese was hung up from the ceiling in the room (in wintertime), or from a high pole in the yard (in summertime). Near the cheese, a long strap of rawhide, soaked with oil, was hung. Youths were to climb the belt and try to take a bite of the cheese. However, due to the slipperiness of the strap and the firmness of the cheese, it was not an easy task. Even the supreme efforts of the most determined and brave participants failed causing laughs for everyone in attendance. This rite was an opportunity for the young men to prove themselves before the women and display their courage, endurance, wit and adroitness. The one who managed to bite the cheese was praised by all.

A clever young man usually started the competition. The rite was accompanied with loud exclamations and wishes of luck to the newborn child. The participants attempted numerous times to take a bite of the cheese. Emotions and cheers surged. Anyone who did not take part was not allowed to see the baby. For this reason, the grandmother called upon the youths to be even more active and sing various comic folk songs to draw the evil eye away from the newborn child.

*Къуаер гъугъэ,  
къуаер Iусы,  
зынэ хэфэр,  
Зынэ цыгъучъэр  
Къое гъугъэм кьерэцакъ!*

Smoked cheese,  
Cheese is a food,  
The one who has a sharp eye,  
The one who has a vague eye,  
Let him take a bite of the cheese (Archive, File 1/137: 9).

Many songs were simple in form and content and described in unpleasant terms the shortcomings of the baby. These songs were supposed to keep away evil eye from the baby, having obvious apotropaic function. Cf.

*Ынэ нэтIыракъ,  
Ыжэ жабгъо,  
Цэ иIэн,  
Тфу, тфу!  
Iэ дэд, тхьам ихьакI.*

He is snub-nosed,  
 He has a large mouth,  
 And is deprived of teeth,  
 Pah, pah, pah...  
 He is very ugly, being a guest of God!.

According to the tradition, special lullabies were composed for the newborn child. In the peasant environment, such songs were created by the mother or grandmother of the baby. Noble families maintained special tutors, called *atalyk*, who entrusted the composition of lullabies to musicians.

#### PUTTING THE BABY TO CRADLE

The newborn child was first placed in the cradle two weeks after birth. The family prepared lavish entertainment for the occasion. On the appointed day, the maternal grandmother would bring a cradle with all required accessories. A hawthorn cradle was believed to bring happiness, health and strength to the child (Archive, 1/137: 7). Sloe cradles were a bad omen, foreboding misery and hard luck to the baby. It had even become proverbial: *Пырэжъые кушьэ уцанIугъэмэ насып пфэс-шIыжъын слъэкIына?*, “How can I make you happy, if you have grown up in a sloe cradle?”.

The cradle and other accessories of the first male offspring were usually prepared by the maternal uncle or grandmother. For girls, they were prepared by the paternal grandmother (ibid.). Another Adyghe saying runs: *Пхъорэльф пшьэшьабэ фаем ыпхъу пшьэшьэ кушьэ фэрэшI*, “If you want to have many granddaughters, prepare a girlish cradle”. This ritual was accompanied with special songs that had varied subjects according to the sex of the baby. In older times, there also existed a custom of placing a cat and an egg into the cradle before putting the baby there. After the cat had napped in the cradle, Adyghe believed that it was now a perfect place for the child to rest: *Чэтыужъым фэдэу орэчъый!*, “Let him sleep like a cat!” (Archiv, 1/52: 30). The egg helps bring about a long life to the child: *КIэнкIэм фэдэу фыжъы охуфэ цыIэнэу*, “Let him live till the days his hair gets as white as this egg is!” (ibid.).

The Adyghe used to entrust a kind woman, a mother of a large family, to put the baby into cradle for the first time. The latter sang a song:

Кушъэм чэтыур щычъыягъ,  
 Чъые Iэшлур къыринагъ,  
 Чъые Iэшлур къыфэКлонэу  
 СэIошгы сикIалэ кушъэм хэсэпхэ.  
 Уикушъашъхэ мазэм пэшIэт,  
 УикушъапIэ дышъэ идагъ,  
 Дышъэ шъхъантэм ущысэгъэчъый,  
 Лай-лай дахэкIэ ухэсэгъэчъый.

A cat snatched a nap in the cradle,  
 And left its sweet sleep there;  
 That sweet sleep will come to the baby.  
 Foretelling, I put him into the cradle.  
 The head of your bed plays with the moon,  
 Your cradle-bedding is embroidered with gold,  
 You are sleeping on a golden pillow,  
 And singing lay-lay I am rocking you to sleep.<sup>13</sup>

A particular magical meaning was attached to this song. After the ritual, it served as a lullaby for the baby. Those present would also curse the people who were believed to not love the baby: *Шу узымыльэгъурэр хым ерэтхьал*, “Let the one who does not love you drown in the sea!”. This song and the following curse were performed nearly at all rituals dedicated to the childbirth. The lullabies had a special place in the system of upbringing. After the ceremony, the grandmother would say:

ГъучIыпсэу,  
 псэ пытэу,  
 БэгъашIэу,  
 гъэшIэ кIахъэу  
 Тхъэ уешI!.

Let God give you an iron soul,  
 A strong soul,  
 And a long life! (Archive, File 1/137: 2).

In order to protect the baby from evil eye, the Adyhges observed various rites. They placed a cup of consecrated water with an egg in it near the cradle, believing that the egg would crack if an evil spirit ap-

<sup>13</sup> Recorded from Khajet Khamkhatu.

peared. The visitors were to wet their hands in the water and wipe the baby's forehead. There was a song about this rite:

*ЗынатIэ кIэнкIэпс  
Зынэмысыгъэ кIалэм  
ИгъаиIэ кIэко дэд,  
ЗынатIэ амытхъакIыгъэ кIалэм  
игъаиIэ мэкIэ дэд.*

The child, whose forehead, hasn't been wrinkled,  
With water containing an egg,  
Will not live a long life,  
The boy, whose forehead has not been washed,  
Has a short life.<sup>14</sup>

A hen's egg has always played an important role in folk superstitions, serving as protection, a talisman. Such rites were observed not only among the Adyghes. Armenians hang an egg near the bed or put two or three eggs in a cup with water and place it at the bedside of an ill person (Čursin 1929: 13).

Shapsugs would place a bundle with a nail (betokening long life), salt, a shell of a snail (called "head of a snake"), and sulphur. Circassians also hang the shell of a snail, a part of a hauberk, silver coins, breast of a cock with feathers, neck of a hedgehog, kernels of a date-palm and claws of a bear (Kiržinov 1974: 498). The Adyghes put iron things in the pillow of a newborn baby.

The Adyghes never rocked an empty cradle, being afraid that the child would die. Ossetians and Turks also did not allow the rocking of empty cradles.

In order to distract the evil eye from the baby, they fastened a bit of propolis on the baby's crown (*псынIанIэ*), supposing that "they need to spoil something on the face or head of the baby", so the "defect" would draw away an evil eye. For this purpose, they soiled the baby's forehead, nose and chin with soot, etc. (Mafedzev 1979: 97). They also attached a pin on the backside of a child's skirt, or sewed a red cloud on the most visible part of it.

The child was never left alone in the room. In cases when all adults were compelled to leave the room, they placed a broom at the bedside. Abkhazians placed a broom under the cradle. On the threshold of the baby's bedroom, they left the jacket of his father, so that the evil spirits

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<sup>14</sup> Recorded from the same informant (see the previous fn.).

could not harm him. According to Adyghe beliefs, most evil spirits were afraid of melodic songs with menacing content:

*Уа-оу, сыонэмсэ убьбын,  
Уа-оу, сыкъьуапцэмэ уӀуихын,  
Хьым уехь, машӀом уехь.  
УенэцӀынэу зи симьӀ.*

Ua-ou, if I touch you, you will fly away,  
Ua-ou, if I blow, you will be thrown away,  
Let the sea take you away, let the fire destroy you.  
I have nothing for you to envy me.<sup>15</sup>

The appearance of the first tooth was also a happy event for the family, and was accompanied with traditional rites. The child was taken to the shed and smudged with cow-dung. It was believed that this custom made the cutting of other teeth easier and faster.

The mother was not allowed to count the appearance of teeth, because that would increase soreness. If it was a woman to first notice the appearance of a tooth, she was to make a cheesecake, singing:

*Цыгьом ыцэ пытэ,  
ГьучӀэр ельы,  
Чыгор ежьо.*

“A mouse has strong teeth,  
It can sharpen iron,  
And plough the land”.<sup>16</sup>

The existence of magical elements (strong teeth like that of a mouse) relates this song to the ritual ones. The performer received a present from the mother of the child (sometimes a fabric for a dress or a silken shawl). In case a man first noticed the cutting of the initial tooth, he made a present for the baby. Not only members of the family, but also neighbours, the midwife and relatives took part in the celebration of this event.

Baby's fingernails were clipped in the daytime, on particular days—Thursday, Friday, and Sunday. More often, the mother would not cut the nails, but would bite them off and give them to the grandmother to keep. The family members were glad if the nails grew fast: *ЗыӀэб-*

<sup>15</sup> Recorded from Rabigat Khut, an 80 years old lady.

<sup>16</sup> From the same informant (see the previous fn.).

*жъанэ къэкIыгъошIу сабыир къэхъугъошIу хъуцт*, “If the nails grow fast, the child develops well”.

#### THE CELEBRATION OF THE FIRST STEP

On the first birthday of the child the rite of the first step, *плетегеуц*, was held. The child was dressed in a red skirt embroidered with many-coloured threads, as it was believed that bright colours drew the evil eye away. Women and children taking part in the ritual mostly concentrated their attention on the skirt, forgetting about the baby. The solemn atmosphere, music, and behaviour of the participants emphasised the importance of the event. Everyone tried to keep the newly walking child from falling, and believed in the magical power of the ritual. They put the child on his feet on hard objects, like stones, wishing: *Мыжъо пытэм фэдэу ылъакъо терэм!*, “Let him stand firm on his feet, as a stone!”.

They also imitated the cutting of invisible ties, supposedly binding the legs of the baby. The ritual of the first step was not merely an entertaining ceremony. Its main idea was the symbolic choice of the future occupation of the child. For this purpose, different objects, denoting various professions, were put on the table, for example, a dagger, a picture of a horse, axe, hammer, knife, the Qur’an, etc. for a boy, and threads, needles, scissors, and other feminine devices for a girl. The object first touched by the child denoted his future profession. In noble families, if the boy chose a dagger, parents bought a precious one for him; if he chose the picture of a horse, they bought him a horse and a saddle with gold and silver decorations, when he grew older (Kiržinov 1974: 499).

On the first birthday of the male infant, parents sacrificed a goat in a holy place, asking God to keep him away from wars. They also left his old skirt on a branch of a tree, taking another one, left by others on such an occasion. Only men were supposed to take part in the ritual, and for that reason it was called *ЛытхьалъэIу* (lit. “Men’s prayer”) (Archive, File 1-137: 20).

If the child did not eat with an appetite, a ritual cake was placed on his belly, which was to be eaten by a dog. According to the magical character of the action, the child started to eat with gusto, just like the dog.

If the child did not have a good sleep, parents took him to the river, asking *АкъуачIэ гуацэ*,<sup>17</sup> to give him a sound sleep.

*АкъуачIэ гуацэ,  
Гуацэу лъэрыкIуа,  
Чъые тилахэнышъ, тыгъэрэхъат.*

Akuača—the goddess,  
The flowing goddess,  
We have lost our sleep, calm us down!<sup>18</sup>

Wishing a sound sleep to the child, parents also put a sheep hoof or a snake slough under his pillow,<sup>19</sup> put him on a broom and gave him holy water to drink. This was a widespread magic, attested also in Central Russia.

The Adyghe held also a ritual called *ДэлъэнсэчIэки* (lit. “Getting through the roots of a nut tree”) for unhealthy children. For this purpose, family members prepared food and invited two neighbours with “light hands” and “kind eyes”. Thereafter, the child was taken to the holy nut tree, under which a big hole was dug. Neighbours would rapidly pass the child to one another, while the grandmother would sing:

*Узи, бзэджэ-наджу илэр нэрэз!  
Узи, бзэджэ-наджу илэр отэм!*

Let illnesses and evil spirits stay away from him,  
We are giving the illnesses and evil powers to you!<sup>20</sup>

Thereafter, they covered the hole with earth, believing that the child would recover soon.

Nowadays, the system of raising children in Adyghe society has undergone radical changes. A number of new holidays and rites are now practiced, which are in line with the conditions of modern life. New methods are now applied for the protection of the pregnancy. As a result of the changes many of the old rituals connected with this period in a woman’s life are gradually being forgotten.

<sup>17</sup> Goddess of seas and rivers, as informed Mussa Alyaev, 82 years old, from *Tuapsinskij rajon*.

<sup>18</sup> Recorded from Doletkhan Tlif.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Recorded from Salima Alyaeva, a native woman from *Tuapsinskij rajon*, 70 years old.

Generally, it is accepted that the upbringing of children is the main responsibility of the mother. Other members of the family can only assist her.

Of all the rituals associated with childhood in this survey, only some of them are practiced now, though sporadically. Others have been consigned to oblivion.

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