

COMPARISON  
OF THE RITUALS  
FROM CHILD'S BIRTH  
TO BEGINNING SCHOOL  
IN THE KARAIMS AND  
ANATOLIAN TURKS   ◎ *Fikret Türkmen*  
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There are three significant transitional rituals in human life: birth, marriage and death. Within these three steps, which are subdivided, there are organized some other rituals, too. These rituals vary in every society. The Aim of these rituals, which conform with the expectations of society, is to determine the new status of people in a transition period, to celebrate, as well as to save him / her from dangerous and harmful influences<sup>1</sup>.

This paper deals with various practices and rituals from the birth of a child, perhaps the most important phase of transition, to the age when he / she starts school education; a comparison between Karaims and Anatolian Turks is made. In addition, this paper also deals with their beliefs, which are preserved from very ancient times on, and the influences of their new life-styles.

Birth is of very great importance among the Turks, as it means continuation of the generation, and thus continuation of the society. Childlessness is regarded in a sense as a punishment or damn given by God. The tale "*Boğaç Han, son of Dirse Han*" in the Book of Dede Korkut, which has traces of the oldest times of the Turks and which is considered to be one of the magnificent pieces of Turkish literature, frankly shows that childless people were reproached among them. In a banquet for Oghuz magnates, Bayındır Han orders those having a son to sit in the white tent, those having a daughter in the red tent, and those having no child in the black tent. Bayındır Han sums up this belief by saying: "God cursed them, and we also curse"<sup>2</sup>.

As can be deduced from the Book of Dede Korkut, which reflects various layers of Turkish culture, having a child, especially a son, was very important and brought a high status to fathers in the society. They believed that those having no child, e.g., those not contributing to the continuation of the society, were cursed by God. A male child was more important in patriarchal societies, as he would continue the lineage<sup>3</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> *Sedat Veyis Örnek*. Türk Halkbilimi. Ankara, 2000, s. 131.

<sup>2</sup> *Muharrem Ergin*. Dede Korkut Kitabı. C. I, s. 77–79.

<sup>3</sup> *Naciye Yıldız*. Manas Destanı (W. Radloff) ve Kırgız Kültürü ile İlgili Tespit ve Tahliller. Ankara, 1995, s. 281–283.

As stated in the Book of Dede Korkut, having children is important both among the Karaims and Anatolian Turks. Men and women with children get respect and prestige in the society. In Karaim nuptials, male and female children gather around the marrying couples so that they have many children<sup>4</sup>. The consideration behind this behaviour is that every child helps rise the number of family, kinship, and lineage<sup>5</sup>. A similar attitude is crucial in the Anatolian Turks: A male child is given to the bride. The proverb "*The state is son, commodity is grain, property is mill*" is the best indicator of that having a son is a reason for privilege in Anatolia. If the first child is male, then the father and grandfathers of the child feel pride in the society. The same is true for the Karaims, too. The father and grandfather of the child become heroes in the society and enjoy a special respect<sup>6</sup>. Thus, this means that in both communities male children are more preferable than female.

The birth of a child is a significant and gladsome event among both the Karaims and Anatolian Turks. Among the Karaims, like in Anatolia, the birth happens at home, with women around. A midwife or an experienced woman is called for and there are always enough people to help her. Having birth in hospitals, under the control of male doctors, was not much acceptable at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and early in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. After birth, women used to help the young mother in doing what was necessary<sup>7</sup>.

After the birth of the child, people visit the confined mother and see the baby. These visits aim at congratulating both the mother who brought a new individual to the society, and the child who newly joined the society. These visits continue from the third day of the birth up to the fortieth days, and visitors bring gifts in accordance with their relationships and economic conditions<sup>8</sup>. Common gifts in Anatolia are foods like milk, patties, rice, candies, a candy tied with a red ribbon, and other things such as a headgear, a towel, clothes, baby dress, toys, gold, and amulets<sup>9</sup>. Karaims, who have this custom of visit, also bring gifts regardless of their prices<sup>10</sup>.

The first practice after the birth concerns the umbilical cord of the baby. People believe that the umbilical cord, which is cut, determines the baby's fate. For instance, according to an Anatolian belief, if the cord is just thrown away, then the

<sup>4</sup> Altinkaynak E. *Tozlu Zaman Perdesinde Kırım Karaylar*. Haarlem, 2006, s. 77.

<sup>5</sup> Örnek S. V. Türk Halkbilimi, s. 131.

<sup>6</sup> Altinkaynak E. *Tozlu Zaman...*, s. 79.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, s. 79.

<sup>8</sup> Örnek S. V. Türk Halkbilimi, s. 160–161.

<sup>9</sup> Orhan Acıpayamlı. *Türkiye'de Doğumla İlgili Âdet ve İnanmaların Etnolojik Etüdü*. Erzurum, 1961, s. 71.

<sup>10</sup> Altinkaynak E. *Tozlu Zaman...*, s. 79.

child will leave home; if it is buried in the garden of a mosque, the child will be religious, if buried in the garden of a school, the child will attend school. Families carry out practices regarding the cord in accordance with their expectations. As they want the basic particularity of the practice to pass into the baby, one can see a sympathetic magic behind these practices<sup>11</sup>. Among the Karaims, mother used to carry with her the dried umbilical cord of her baby and a bunch of hair cut in the first haircut in a skin or fabric purse. Thus, they believed, the child was saved from the evil<sup>12</sup>. This practice can be observed among the Altai Turks and in some places in Dobrogea and Anatolia. There is a belief among the Dobrogean Turks that the umbilical cord saved until the child grows up is his / her fortune<sup>13</sup>.

Another practice carried out after birth is "salting". The newly born child is salted either by directly applying salt on its skin, or by washing with salty water. This is done in some places immediately after the birth and in others after cutting the umbilical cord or after washing. Salting is done so that the child does not badly smell, sweat, become healthy, and his / her injuries recover rapidly<sup>14</sup>. Salting is known among the Lithuanian Karaims, too. According to the book "Karay Din-lilärnin Yalbarmax Yergäläri -II-" (Lithuania 1999, p. 33) of Mykolas Firkovičius, the umbilical cords of babies are washed after cutting and then salted<sup>15</sup>. It is possible that salting has a "magical" function, as well as helps in healing and saving, because it is known that salt, which has magical features, is also used to protect people from the evil eye<sup>16</sup>.

The Karaims washed the heads of babies by putting yolk into salty water<sup>17</sup>. A similar practice exists among the Dobrogean Turks, too: "*Baby is washed in the first day with an egg, and in some places with water containing yolk and sugar. The yolk is for might and cleanliness, and sugar is its being sweet.*" We know that a baby is being washed with egg for a long time. Washing with egg is considered as the first measure "*to improve the skin*"<sup>18</sup>. Besides, while giving their gifts, the Karaims wish the

<sup>11</sup> *Mustafa Aça* Balıkesir Yöresi Doğum Sonrası İnanış ve Uygulamalar. İstanbul, 2005, s. 43–44; *Ali Çelik* Trabzon-Şalpazarı Çepni Kültürü. Trabzon, 1999, s. 300, 315.

<sup>12</sup> *Altınkaynak E.* Tozlu Zaman..., s. 79.

<sup>13</sup> *Mehmet Naci Önal* Romanya Dobruca Türkleri ve Mukayeseleriyle Doğum, Evlenme ve Ölüm Âdetleri. Ankara, 1998, s. 41–42.

<sup>14</sup> *Acıpayamlı O.* Türkiye'de Doğumla İlgili Âdet ve İnanmaların..., s. 56; *Mehmet Aça* Türk Halk Geleneğindeki Doğum Sonrası Uygulamalara Bir Örnek: Tuzlama, Tuz Kitabı. İstanbul, 2004, s. 103–104.

<sup>15</sup> *Özlem Kazan* Karay Kültüründe Tuz. Tuz Kitabı. İstanbul, 2004, s. 130–131.

<sup>16</sup> *Yüksel Kırımlı* İnanç, Nazar ve Nazara Karşı Tuz. Tuz Kitabı. İstanbul, 2004, s. 68–72; *Aça M.* Türk Halk Geleneğindeki..., s. 104.

<sup>17</sup> *Altınkaynak E.* Tozlu Zaman..., s. 79.

<sup>18</sup> *Önal M. N.* Romanya Dobruca Türkleri..., s. 43–45.

babies a life which is clean, conglobated, white and sound like an egg. According to an old tradition, a newly born baby drinks an uncooked egg as a life-granting potion. In Anatolia, raw egg is given mixed with grape molasses<sup>19</sup>.

Another practice done after the birth is the cradle ritual. This ritual is observed among both the Anatolian and non-Anatolian Turks (Kazakhs, Uzbeks, Karachay-Malkars, etc.). Though there are some regional differences in these rituals which are done when the baby is to put on its bed, the basic assumption is the same. In Balikesir, individuals of the family gather during this ritual, they say prayers and eat meals<sup>20</sup>. In Erzurum, a baby lies with its mother seven days and then is put into its own bed, after being washed by the midwife who had assisted in the birth<sup>21</sup>. In Karaims, too, the baby spends the first months in its cradle within swaddle. To swing an empty cradle is not accepted, as they believe this will disturb the baby. The cradle can be transferred from generation to generation. It is believed that growing in a cradle in which the baby's father or even grandfather grew brings fortune to the baby<sup>22</sup>.

In Karaims, a newly born baby and its mother do not travel for, do not go for family visiting, and strangers do not see them for the first forty days. Isolating mother and baby (especially a male one) is nearly a religious rule<sup>23</sup>. In Anatolia, also, mother and her baby do not go out, so that "forty" does not come upon them. The reason is that mother, who is very weak in those days, and the little baby are open to all kinds of danger. The practice of "fortying" is performed to save the mother and the baby from the possible threats. These practices, done within the first forty days after the birth, are carried out by washing with water in some places and by passing the baby under the cradle in other places, and people believe that mother and baby are cleaned from the dirt of the confined situation. Thanks to these practices, mother and baby are both saved from the evil and join the society as cleaned<sup>24</sup>. In Anatolia, women who do not complete the forty days cannot pray, have sexual relations with her husband and touch blessed things, as they are not yet cleaned from the dirt of confining. For example, people believe that a confined woman gives harm to her baby, if she cuts a branch of blessed trees. A similar belief exists among the Gagauz Turks. Among them, a woman before completing her

<sup>19</sup> Altinkaynak E. Tozlu Zaman..., s. 79.

<sup>20</sup> Aça M. Türk Halk Geleneğindeki..., s. 46.

<sup>21</sup> Hülya Taş Erzurum'da Doğum ve Çocukla İlgili Eski Âdet ve İnançlar, Türk Halk Kültüründen Derlemeler 1994, Ankara, 1996, s. 205.

<sup>22</sup> Altinkaynak E. Tozlu Zaman..., s. 79–80.

<sup>23</sup> Altinkaynak E. Tozlu Zaman..., s. 79.

<sup>24</sup> Acipayamlı O. Türkiye'de Doğumla İlgili Âdet..., s. 94, 122, 130.

forty days should not take water from a fountain or a well<sup>25</sup>. In both areas, confined women are prohibited to touch holy things. A confined woman and her baby can join the society only after “fortying”. Among the Karay Turks, the duration of cleaning from the dirt of confining varies depending on whether a child is male or female, and the rules of the Old Testament determine it. If the child is male, the woman is regarded as dirty for seven days, and she is cleaned with her own blood for 33 days. If the child is female, the woman is dirty for two weeks, and the duration for cleaning from her blood is 66 days. Within those days, it is forbidden to her to touch holy things and to go to synagogue (kenasa) and cemetery<sup>26</sup>.

Another practice done after birth is circumcision, which is observed among both the Muslim Anatolian Turks and Mosaic Karay Turks. Though Islam does not make circumcision obligatory, the verse “Follow the canon of the Prophet Abraham in this matter” in the Koran led it to be a general rule, and especially in Turkey it became an obligatory tradition. In the Torah, the holy book of the Jewry, it takes place as a religious rule. Circumcision is accepted as a sign of unity of the Yahova and God, since God ordered Prophet Abraham and his kinship to be circumcised<sup>27</sup>. Among the Karaims, circumcision is done on the eighth day after birth in accordance with the verdict “Cut the tip of your body. This becomes a sign among us. Your sons or children that are born have to be circumcised within eight days” (Old Testament, Genesis, XVII, 11–12); and if the child is sick, then the recovery is waited for. The feast of circumcision in the Karaims is done in the following way: “The feast used to be at the home of the parents. Their kinships, friends, neighbours, the gazzan (Karaim clerk), chief of the community, and the circumcision-maker used to come to the feast. Those who would be “mother and father” of the child during the baptism, with whom they previously agreed, also used to be invited. The latter were called “dear man – dear lady”. There was a banquet for guests like in weddings. The baptism mother would take the baby from the room where he slept to the one where he would be circumcised on a bolster, and delivered him to the baptism father. The latter, after taking the baby, used to sit on a seat and listen to the prayer of the gazzan. Then he would say: “Oğlum doğdu, biyanç bizge” (my son was born; gladness to us), and the baby would be circumcised. After that, the baptism father used to take the crying baby out of the room and deliver to the baptism mother. And she gave the baby to his mother. The proper mother used to go to another room to suckle the baby.”

With the invitation of the father, the guests sit around the table. The gazzan says a prayer and gives the baby his name and then takes his place at the head of the

<sup>25</sup> Aça M. Türk Halk Geleneğindeki..., s. 39–40.

<sup>26</sup> Altıncıyanak E. Tozlu Zaman..., s. 80–81.

<sup>27</sup> Örnek S. V. Türk Halkbilimi, s. 173.

table. Then, the father accepts congratulations. This banquet used to last several hours. Firstly men and then women used to sit round the table. The hosts used to offer national meals, akalva (Karay meal), various meat meals, wine and çeburaksi to the guests. The baby was given gifts. Girls did not participate in this ritual.

Sometimes, the gazzan and the circumcision-maker could not go to distant villages. In this case, religious men of the Crimean Tatars would also be invited for this job. It was possible to see these kinds of things late in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Today, people do not perform these rituals, except some rare instances, and those are without a banquet.”<sup>28</sup>

Circumcision, which frankly is not obligatory in Islam, is the most rigid and commonly performed tradition among religious or ritual practices in Anatolia. All boys are circumcised in Anatolia, and those not circumcised are insulted by the society. There is no general regulation about age: Children are circumcised from four-five to fifteen years. In recent times, city habitants make this immediately after their baby is born, so that he does not feel pain in bigger ages and his upcoming fears are prevented. Circumcision feasts in Anatolia are rituals organized in the day when the child is circumcised. Almost all acquaintances are invited to these rituals; the child puts on special dresses; a banquet is organized in accordance with the financial situation of the family; some plays are organized to entertain the boy; and those participating in the ritual give their gifts<sup>29</sup>. Some families do not make feasts, but only have “mevlit” (a kind of religious ceremony particular to Anatolia and the Balkans) recited, and some others organize a feast together with the mevlit.

Another practice after the birth of baby is denomination. This is of institutional character among the Turks. The name, representing a social personality, represents also a might in the magic sense. As people think that there is a connection between the name of a man and his personality and fate, the names of children are not selected haphazardly, and some practices are performed during the denomination. Especially among conservative people, denomination is made by blessing and congratulating. A hodja (religious leader) or an elder of the family, invited to give the child the determined name, recites “ezan” (Muslim religious calling to pray) to the ear of the baby and repeats its name three times. After that, meals are eaten, and in some places the mevlit is recited. Some factors play role in naming children. The events occurring during the birth, the time when the birth occurs, the death of previous children, family elders, cultural changes and the influence of Islam (religious people, words from the Koran, etc.) are among those factors<sup>30</sup>. Like

<sup>28</sup> Altinkaynak E. Tozlu Zaman..., s. 80.

<sup>29</sup> Örnek S. V. Türk Halkbilimi, s. 170–181.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid, s. 148–149.

in Anatolian Turks, the influence of both their new religions and old traditions and belief systems are observed in naming children among the Karaims. They continued using the names that came from their far ancestors, such as Babakay, Tohtamış, Altın, Aytoli, besides the names coming from the Old Testament like Musa, Azarya, Ezra, Sima, etc. Among the Karaims, the selected name is told to the gazzan, and the latter only announces this name to the community. Families usually prefer names of their grandfathers and grandmothers; the name given by the gazzan is attested only in official documents, or both names are written together. To sum it up, the Karaims preserved old Turkish traditions, while they confess the Old Testament<sup>31</sup>.

There is no general precept in Anatolia regarding the time of naming babies. The name can be given in the birthday, within the first three days, after one week, 10 days or 40 days. In the Islamic understanding, a baby should have a name within a short time (on the birth day, third day, or within seven days)<sup>32</sup>. The Old Turkish belief system contains a dogma that evil spirits would take possession of the baby, if it was not given a name within a short time. As a reflection of this belief, the Altai and Gagauz Turks have national names, besides their official names. As it is accepted as ominous among the Karaims not to give a name for a long time, before the official naming the baby was given a national name or a nickname which was then used at home. This name sometimes could be written in official documents together with the name given by the gazzan<sup>33</sup>. The ritual of naming varies in males and females in the Karaims. They used to organize a ritual for she-babies after two weeks, on Saturday, after the father went to kenasa. The gazzan having named the baby, people used to eat meals. He-babies used to receive their names from the gazzan during the circumcision feast, and then people ate meals. Since the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the religious and national customs of the Karaims have faced changes, and now also they themselves denominate their children<sup>34</sup>.

As traces of ancient belief systems in naming still continue both in the Karaims and Anatolian Turks, there are several common points. For instance, Anatolian families whose children died, call their last born child with names such as "Dur-sun", "Durmuş", "Yaşar" (respectively "let he / she remain", "he / she remained", "he / she lives") so that it would live, and with insulting names like "İtbarak",

<sup>31</sup> *Altinkaynak E.* Tozlu Zaman..., s. 81.

<sup>32</sup> *Acıpayamlı O.* Türk Kültüründe 'Ad Koyma Folkloru'nun Morfolojik ve Fonksiyonel Yönlerden İncelenmesi // IV. Milletlerarası Türk Halk Kültürü Kongresi Bildirileri. C. IV, Ankara, 1992, s. 4-5.

<sup>33</sup> *Altinkaynak E.* Tozlu Zaman..., s. 81; *Altinkaynak E.* Karay Ad ve Soyadları // Karadeniz Araştırmaları, III / 9 (Spring 2006), s. 132.

<sup>34</sup> *Altinkaynak E.* Tozlu Zaman..., s. 80-82.

“İtbey” (“hairy dog”, “dog-lord”) to save it from evil spirits, evil eyes and Azrael. Another practice to let the last born child live is to sell the baby for a symbolical fee in order to beguile evil spirits. Babies facing this practice are called “Satılmış” (“Sold out”). Similar practices exist among the Karaims, too. Erdoğan Altrinkaynak says in his book “Kırım Karayları”: “If children often fell sick in a family, or if death was often, children were used to be named with protecting names, for example, Kargal-ata, Sopsonuk, etc. to save from the Satan. If children died and the parents did not want a baby any more, then they gave the names Toktamış and Tohtar. If a child fell sick, and if there was no much possibility to recover, one of the close relations used to buy the child for a little price and give it another name. If the child healed, he / she used to return to his family with a new name. The buying people were to be his / her second parents, and the latter had a right over the child, based on respect.”<sup>35</sup> Thus, they used to deceive evil sprits with a special grudge towards the family by showing that the baby did not belong to that family, and people used to think that there would be no more evil.

This short study shows how the Anatolian and Karaim Turks, who have been separated from each other for a long time and who are of different confessions, have common values. We are of the opinion that the dimensions of these associations would rise in accordance with the rise in studies and relations.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid, s. 81–82.