

# The “Rites of Passage” Among the Azerbaijani Turks: Traditional Beliefs and Rituals Linked to the Birth of a Child

*Rufat Sattarov, Berlin*

The term “rites of passage” was introduced into scholarly literature by the French ethnographer Arnold van Gennep (1873–1957). In his book *Les Rites de Passage*, published in 1909, he used this term to describe ceremonies attached to such significant transitional stages in man’s life as conception, birth, puberty, marriage, and death (van Gennep 1960). This paper will examine basic features of the rites of passage linked to childbirth, which are peculiar to the Azerbaijani Turks living in the Republic of Azerbaijan.

## *Introduction*

The rites of passage among the Azerbaijani Turks are distinguished by specific historical, religious, and cultural peculiarities. Of special importance in this regard are the rites connected to childbirth. Traditionally, having many children has been one of the most distinguishing features of Azerbaijani families.<sup>1</sup> Even during the Soviet period it was not uncommon to see names of Azerbaijani women on the lists of so-called heroine mothers (*materi-geroini*) – the title conferred upon mothers of ten children or more by the Soviet authorities.<sup>2</sup>

To this day, in the majority of Azerbaijani families girls are brought up with the idea of being “brides” already from their early years. They have almost no childhood, no personal model of life, and they are denied the free choice in matters of love – “they are born to start a new healthy family” (Kuliev 2002: 44). That is why one of the problems an Azerbaijani woman fears most after the wedding is to discover that she is sterile.<sup>3</sup> Among the common people a sterile woman (or man) is called *sonsuz* (lit. “without end”). A family without children is considered to be unfortunate, and it is often said about such a family:

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<sup>1</sup> For a comparative perspective on this subject see Firshtein 1978.

<sup>2</sup> According to 1978 data, this title was conferred upon 19,911 Azerbaijani women (“Qəhrəman Ana” 1979); in 1990, 194 women were granted the title “heroine mother” and 7,301 received the decoration “glory of motherhood” (*Azərbaycan Respublikası Dövlət Statistika Komitəsi* 1991: 17).

<sup>3</sup> Notwithstanding “enlightening” Soviet influence, among the common people sterility is still mainly associated with women and rarely with men.

*onlara Allahın qəzəbi gəlmişdir*

(The punishment of Allah has befallen them.)

Folk wisdom has brought forth the following proverb on this matter:

*balalı ev – bazardır, balasız ev – mazardır*

(A household with children is like a bazaar, a household without children is like a grave.

Vəliyev 1985: 104)

As a rule, if a young woman cannot conceive during thirty to forty days after the consumption of the marriage, it is said about her: *gəlin qırxa düşüb* or *gəlin çilləyə düşüb* (the bride has fallen into the forty days' period). The forty days' period (*qırxa*) referred to here is another Azerbaijani life cycle ritual, namely the period of mourning for a deceased person (Sattarov 2009). Thus, the meaning of the phrase *gəlin qırxa düşüb* is that the woman has fallen into a period of mourning, *i.e.* that she is unable to conceive a child. That is why different precautions are taken among the relatives of a newly married woman to prevent her from meeting people who are observing the forty days of mourning, known as *qırxlı* (lit. "those keeping the forty days' mourning"). The same precautions are taken with respect to people who have just visited a place where someone has died (Həvilov 1991: 218).

There is a number of traditional methods aimed at curing cases of sterility among women.<sup>4</sup> For instance, help is sought by visiting *pirs* – local holy places such as graves of saints, holy trees, stones or other objects of veneration considered to possess magical power.<sup>5</sup> Another common recommendation is that a sterile woman should take seven stones from seven different springs and wash them in order to get pregnant (Quliyev and Bəxtiyarov 1968: 38). In many cases female witch doctors specialising in the treatment of sterility are approached for help as well. These witch doctors take their clients either to a local mosque or a cemetery and perform a ceremony known as *çillə kəsmək* (lit. "cutting the forty days' period", see Həvilov 1991: 218).

### *The birth of a child*

Once a woman is pregnant, she is treated with great respect by her relatives and neighbours. It is commonly believed that her every wish should be fulfilled. For instance, if a person eats something in the presence of a pregnant woman, she is to be given the same food.<sup>6</sup> The sex of the future child is not only a matter of

<sup>4</sup> The French ethnographer Henri Massé has pointed out that among some Persians, for instance, a woman fearing sterility would swallow the foreskin of a recently circumcised child (Massé 1954: 7).

<sup>5</sup> For more details on beliefs in supernatural forces among the Azerbaijani Turks, see Sattarov 2007.

<sup>6</sup> The same tradition is mentioned by Massé with regard to the Persians: "if a pregnant woman comes in while a meal is in progress, she must be invited to join immediately" (Massé 1954: 9).

concern to the pregnant woman, but to all her close relatives. Preference is usually given to a male child. This can partly be explained by the traditional role of boys as helpers and providers of the family in contrast to girls, who sooner or later will leave the paternal home. According to traditional Azerbaijani belief there are various methods of determining the sex of a future child. One advice is that a pregnant woman should spread her shawl in the proximity of turtles: if a turtle crawls onto her shawl, she is expecting a boy (Həvilov 1991: 218). It is also believed that if a future mother wants to have a boy, she should recite a special prayer over a sweet pomegranate in the early stages of her pregnancy and then eat one grain of this fruit per day. This is to be continued during the first four months of pregnancy.<sup>7</sup> According to another belief, if a pregnant woman looks at someone while the child is moving in her womb, the child will resemble that very person.<sup>8</sup> However, if she is looking at an animal, it is said that her child will inherit features of the animal in question.<sup>9</sup> In order to avoid all these complications, a pregnant woman is advised to close her eyes when the child moves inside her womb (Həvilov 1991: 219).<sup>10</sup>

Azerbaijanis regard the birth of a child with a sacred reverence. Accordingly, many superstitions are linked to this event. For example, even if a baby is about to be born, family members abstain from buying anything for it before the actual birth. Buying things in advance is considered to be a bad omen that can lead to negative consequences such as the sudden death of the baby at birth or health defects. When something has already been bought for a yet unborn baby, the purchased gift is to be sold for a symbolic price to a close relative with the intention of redeeming it once the child is born.

Precautions against the influence of the "evil eye" (Az. "göz", "nəzər") and people able to cast such looks (*bədnəzər*) are also given special importance on the part of many Azerbaijanis. For instance, in some rural areas it is a tradition for women having difficulties during childbirth (*çətin doğan*) to jump across a fire in order to be cleaned from the possible influence of the "evil eye" (Quliyev and Bəxtiyarov 1968: 56). It is also common to put coal under the pillow of such a woman in order to drive off evil spirits (*ibid.*: 57). However, a complicated birth is mostly associated with the influence of a supernatural creature known as *hal*<sup>11</sup>,

<sup>7</sup> Here we can observe traces of the Islamic belief as reflected in the *Hadith*, according to which the sex of an unborn child is not established before the end of the fourth month of pregnancy (Sattarov 2001). Among the Anatolian Turks eating pomegranates during pregnancy is thought to make the future child clever and nice (Serebryakova 1980: 171).

<sup>8</sup> The same belief can be observed among the Anatolian Turks (Serebryakova 1980: 170).

<sup>9</sup> For example, children can be born with hair on their body or with a harelip.

<sup>10</sup> Massé wrote that in (Iranian) Azerbaijan "it is believed that if a pregnant woman accepts something to eat from a person, her child will resemble this person; thus she must be beware of strangers" (Massé 1954: 12).

<sup>11</sup> Massé traces the history of this name back to the Turkish word "*al*" (red). According to him this explains a custom among the Persians not to bring anything red into the room of a woman in labour. In Iran *hal* is considered to be a blond-haired creature, which torments

*hal anası* (mother-*hal*) or *hal arvadı* (woman-*hal*). In Azerbaijani folk tradition *hal* is an evil spirit of great height (Quliyev and Bəxtiyarov 1968: 78) that lives by or in the water (Izmailova 1980:57) and appears in the guise of a young woman with bird-like legs and big breasts, which she carries on her shoulders while walking (Quliyev and Bəxtiyarov 1968: 78). Sometimes this evil spirit is described as a woman with big black eyes (*ibid.*).<sup>12</sup> According to folk belief, the *hal*'s main task is to cause trouble to women in labour and to their children. It enters the room of the woman in question and frightens her with its ugly appearance until she loses consciousness. Then the *hal* takes out the heart and liver of the woman and puts them into water, which is thought to be the main cause of a woman's death during childbirth. In order to bring the woman back to consciousness, her relatives usually pull her ears, pinch her, and slap her cheeks in order to frighten the *hal* (Pashaev 1998: 134). Sometimes a piece of fresh meat is placed on the back of a woman in labour as a precaution against the *hal* (*ibid.*). Other precautions against this evil spirit include placing a knife or another iron object under the bolster of a woman in labour, crying loudly, firing a rifle, and tying a woolen cord (*sicim*) around the bed (Izmailova 1980: 57; Quliyev and Bəxtiyarov 1968: 78). If all these measures appear to be ineffective, it is said that the *hal* is trying to take the woman away. In this case, one of the woman's relatives is to go to a nearby river and "cut" the river with a dagger before the *hal* "washes" the woman's organs in it (Pashaev 1998: 134). Furthermore, a basin with water is to be placed near the woman in labour.<sup>13</sup> It is believed that sometimes a newborn child can also be harmed by the *hal* (it can even die), if the latter feeds the baby with its milk (Quliyev and Bəxtiyarov 1968: 78). If the birth ends successfully for mother and child, a certain amount of money or food is to be distributed among needy people as a sign of thankfulness to God (Həvilov 1991: 219).

In rural areas, where to this day births take place at home, only a limited circle of the woman's relatives is present during this event, including her mother, her elder sister, and her mother-in-law. Generally speaking, men are not permitted to attend the birth. The pregnant woman is taken to a separate room, her arms and legs are coloured with henna, a sign of luck and happiness, and a special prayer (*dua*), intended to ease the pains of childbirth and written on a piece of paper, is placed on the back of the woman. Traditionally, after the delivery, the exhausted woman is served a special dish known as *quymaq*. It is made of wheat fried in butter, honey or sugar, and cinnamon or other spices – ingredients aimed at providing the woman with power and energy.

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women in labour, removes their liver and devours it (Massé 1954: 22). Among other Turkic peoples this creature is known as *albasty*, described as a young woman who can also take the shape of an old woman, a yellow dog, a yellow cow, or a snake (Chvyr' 1983: 124).

<sup>12</sup> In the Şamaxı region it is described as a woman resembling a man with blond hair (Quliyev and Bəxtiyarov 1968: 78).

<sup>13</sup> For the same tradition among the Persians see, for example, Massé 1954: 23.

In some Azerbaijani regions honey and butter are spread on the newborn child's tongue.<sup>14</sup> After the birth, the umbilical cord is traditionally buried by one of the mother's close relatives (usually a sister). In the past, the umbilical cord of a female baby used to be buried either at the threshold of the entrance door or in any corner inside the house, so that the newborn girl would be the mistress of a home one day (*evdar olsun*). The umbilical cord of a male baby was buried in a stable or in a mosque for the boy to become the head of a household (Həvilov 1991: 220). In the Bərda region, after a baby is born, the mother is not allowed to see it for one day, because it is thought that the mother's milk will turn bitter if she does.<sup>15</sup>

### *The period of qırxı (forty days)*<sup>16</sup>

For a period of forty days after the birth, known as *qırxı* or *çillə*, the mother and her baby usually stay in the house of her parents. There is a belief that during this time she may not knead dough, prepare food, cook bread, or perform other household tasks (Həvilov 1991: 220). During the *qırxı* period, the mother and the newborn child do not appear in public, and only very close relatives are allowed to see them. In particular, people in mourning are advised not to visit a newborn child. All these precautions are taken in order to avoid the possible influence of the "evil eye".<sup>17</sup> If, nevertheless, someone does come to visit, the mother is to bring the newborn child from its room to show it to the guest. It is not acceptable to let a guest into the child's room in order to avoid the influence of the "evil eye". Sometimes visitors are stopped at the entrance door and asked to pass under the newborn baby that is held up by the mother. Another tradition prescribes taking a newborn baby outside for a moment and bringing it in when guests enter the house (Həvilov 1991: 220). In the Tovuz region, for instance, bread is used in order to neutralise the influence of the "evil eye". With this aim in mind, a piece of bread is held above the head of a guest when he enters the house (Quliyev and Bəxtiyarov 1968: 53).

As a rule, if a child cries for a long time, it is considered to be under the influence of the "evil eye". There are many folk methods to treat the "evil eye". One tradition prescribes that mothers should sprinkle a handful of salt on the head of the child three times and then throw the salt into the fire, uttering one of the following spells:

<sup>14</sup> For a comparison with traditions among the Uzbeks, see Firshtein 1978: 193.

<sup>15</sup> Personal archive of the author, file "Life cycle rituals" (1999–2001).

<sup>16</sup> The symbolic significance of the first forty days after childbirth is characteristic of many Muslim peoples. In Central Asia, for example, this period is also known as *chillya* (Chvyr' 1983: 124).

<sup>17</sup> Massé, citing Isaac Adams, states that in the Iranian region of Urmia girls were not taken out of the house for forty days and boys for three months (Massé 1954: 30, citing I. Adams, *Persia by a Persian*. London, 1906: 191).

*Hər kimin sənə nəzəri dəyibsə, gözlərini daş etdim!*

(I have melted the eyes of everyone whose evil eye has fallen on you!)

*Sənə gözü dəyənin gözlərini bu duzla oda atdım!*

(With this salt I have thrown into the fire the eyes of the one who has cast an evil eye on you!) (*ibid.*: 23)

In many cases coal is used as a means of protecting children against the “evil eye”, because it is believed that the devil is afraid of coal. For example, in some regions of Azerbaijan parents put coal into the nappy of the child when taking it out for a walk in the evening. Another method is to place the coal on the child’s forehead (Quliyev and Bəxtiyarov 1968: 57). In many regions bread is used as a means of treating the possible fright of a child.<sup>18</sup> For this purpose, a piece of bread is placed under the head of the child or inside the cradle during its sleep. Bread is also put into the nappy of the child when taking it outside (*ibid.*).

Usually a woman who has just given birth is exempted from household work at least during the period of *qırxı*. In the Bərdə region, a lock is put on the door of the room in which a mother and her child are staying until the end of the *qırxı* period.<sup>19</sup> It is recommended not to leave the mother alone with her child during this period. Usually, the following things are placed under the pillow of a newborn baby: a piece of bread, a knife, scissors<sup>20</sup>, a needle, and a piece of coal. This is done, as said before, for the baby not to be frightened. Traditionally, the face of a newborn baby is to be covered with gauze while it is asleep. Otherwise, so it is believed, either a mystical bird known as *bəşik quşu* (cradle bird) might harm the baby, or a spirit known as *şaşa* might strangle it (Həvilov 1991: 220; Quliyev and Bəxtiyarov 1968: 78).<sup>21</sup> According to folk tradition, *şaşa* is an evil spirit of black colour and less than a cat in size, which resembles a woman from the side (*ibid.*: 79). It is believed that *şaşa* can strangle the newborn baby on the sixth day after birth, and precautions are taken in order not to leave the child sleeping alone during this period (*ibid.*).<sup>22</sup>

<sup>18</sup> The cult of bread is very popular among the Azerbaijanis, and they have treated bread with great respect since ancient times. Due to the lack of space here I will limit myself to mentioning only one of the many beliefs concerning bread, combining in itself both pagan and Islamic symbolism. According to it, removing the crust of bread is considered to bring misfortune. It is said among the people that a person who does so will be forced to take the skin off his/her face in the Hereafter (Quliyev and Bəxtiyarov 1968: 52).

<sup>19</sup> Personal archive of the author, file “Life cycle rituals” (1999–2001).

<sup>20</sup> The use of metal objects as a protection against the “evil eye” has also been observed among other Caucasian peoples (Pashaev 1998: 135).

<sup>21</sup> According to Persian folk traditions, *şaşa* (from Pers. “şeş” – six) is a genie that can strangle a child on the sixth day unless adequate precautions are taken (Massé 1954: 25).

<sup>22</sup> To this day it is a tradition among some Azerbaijanis that female relatives of the mother spend the night of the sixth day after the child’s birth at her house without sleeping and turning the light off. They put bread and butter at the entrance door for *şaşa* to eat, so that it will leave the child alone (Quliyev and Bəxtiyarov 1968: 79).

In the Qazax region the young women among the close relatives gather for a special dinner nine days after the birth of a baby. Every guest brings some food and sweets. The mother brings her baby into the room and begins to feed it in front of these women. Having done so, the mother hands the baby to every woman present, who kisses it in turn. It is believed that a woman to whom the baby smiles will have her dream come true (Personal archive of the author, file "Life cycle rituals" [1999–2001]). In Baku, when the child is brought from the hospital, one of the family members burns the branch of a tree known as *üzərlik* (wild rue) and puts the ash on the child's forehead to protect it from the influence of the "evil eye". Another means of protection against the "evil eye" popular among many Azerbaijanis is *göz muncuğu*, a blue stone with a small eye on it, which is tied to the cap of a newborn. Sometimes anything made of gold (such as a golden ring) is fastened to the cap together with the *göz muncuğu*, because among the common people gold is considered to be able to attract and neutralise evil energy. In the İsmayılı region a clean vessel is filled with pure water and an egg is put into it as a precaution against the "evil eye". Then this vessel is placed under the bed of the child. If the egg crackles, it is said that it has drawn the power of the "evil eye" upon itself and has thereby protected the child (*ibid.*).

It is recommended to refrain from taking fresh meat into a house in which there is a newborn baby or to cut meat in front of it. The latter will prevent its neck from becoming strong in due time. It is also believed that showing a mirror to the baby can drive it crazy because it will see evil spirits in it (*ibid.*).

In many regions people believe that one should not bathe the child or cut its nails until the period of *qırxı* has passed. In some regions, however, a newborn child is already washed on the 10<sup>th</sup> (this ceremony is called *on suyu* – lit. "the water of ten"), 20<sup>th</sup>, 30<sup>th</sup> and, finally, on the 40<sup>th</sup> day after birth. In the Şəki region, the child is already washed on the fifth day. In the Ağdam region, the child is washed both on the third and on the seventh day after birth. In the Şamaxı region, when washing the baby on the 10<sup>th</sup> day after birth, a special formula is uttered:

*Mundarığın getsin, təmizliyin gəlsin!*

(Let the dirtiness go away, let the cleanliness come!)

The nails of the child are also cut on this occasion. In Bərdə, after cutting the nails, some money is to be placed in one of the baby's hands; otherwise it will become a thief (*ibid.*).

### *The end of the forty days' period*

Once the period of *qırxı* has passed, two important ceremonies are usually celebrated, namely, *qırxıdan çıxma* (lit. "coming out of the forty days") and *ad qoyma* (naming the child).

### *Qırxdan çıxma*

The ceremonies accompanying the end of the forty days' period are known as *qırxdan çıxma*, the most important of which is the ritual ablution of both mother and baby. The period of forty days has a symbolic character, presumably going back to the Islamic tradition of ritual purity. Indeed, according to the *Shari'a*, the end of the forty days' period coincides with the end of the mother's state of impurity, after which she is to perform a full ritual ablution and resume her religious practices like prayers and fasting.

*Qırxdan çıxma* begins with the ritual ablution (*güsl*) on the part of the mother, and after that it is the child's turn. The bathing of the child on the fortieth day after birth takes place in various fashions, depending on the region. In the Ağdam region, for example, the child is wrapped in a piece of fabric and washed with water, especially prepared for this purpose beforehand. The vessel with the water must contain forty grains of wheat, if the child is female, and forty grains of barley, if the child is male. In the absence of either wheat or barley forty small sticks can be used instead. After pouring the water on the child, formulas of *təkbir* (*Allahu akbar*<sup>23</sup>) and *salawat*<sup>24</sup> (*Allahumma salli 'ala Mubammadin va 'ala ali Mubammad*)<sup>25</sup> are pronounced (Personal archive of the author, file "Life cycle rituals" [1999–2001]). In some regions, upon bathing the child, the phrase *qırxını töküürəm* (literally "I am pouring the water of forty days") is uttered (*ibid.*). In the Şamaxı region, a vessel with forty spoons of water is prepared and the water is poured on the head of the child, after which the formula of the Islamic faith, the *shabada*, is pronounced. In the Şəki region, forty small stones are added to the water with the same aim in mind. In the Ordubad region, a vessel inscribed with Qur'anic passages is filled with spring water from a local holy place, prayers are recited over it, and the child is washed with this water (Pashaev 1998: 136).<sup>26</sup> After the ritual bathing, the child's head is usually shaved, because the first hair is considered to be impure (*murdar*).

### *Ad qoyma*

Naming the child, known as *ad qoyma*, is the ceremony that usually follows the ritual ablution. In classical Islamic tradition the naming of a child is usually performed either right after its birth or on the seventh day following it (Sattarov

<sup>23</sup> "Allah is the greatest!"

<sup>24</sup> *Salawat* is a formula of salutation of the Prophet Muhammad and his family. In Azerbaijan this term has lost its basic meaning, signifying today only a process of raising hands and then rubbing them along the face with the right hand first and the left hand second among Shi'is and with both hands among Sunnis.

<sup>25</sup> "O Allah, send prayers on Muhammad and his family!"

<sup>26</sup> The same ritual is performed for the benefit of frightened people.



2001). Among the Azerbaijanis the *ad qoyma* ceremony takes place either on the day of birth, on the seventh day, or as soon as the forty days' period has passed, depending on the region. In the Ordubad region, for instance, *ad qoyma* takes place on the seventh day (Pashaev 1998: 135). In the Bərda region the child is named before the fortieth day, because it is believed that if the baby is named later, he or she will be a liar (Personal archive of the author, file “Life cycle rituals” [1999–2001]). Generally speaking, however, it is up to the family to decide when to name the child, taking into consideration a variety of circumstances.

The name for the child is agreed upon in advance. In the past names were often chosen with the help of a ceremony known as *Qur'an açma* (opening the Qur'an); people used to open any page of the Qur'an at random and choose the first word encountered as name.<sup>27</sup> Today, however, more and more families name the baby either in memory of a deceased relative or after a living relative<sup>28</sup>, although this practice is usually regarded with suspicion and considered as a bad omen<sup>29</sup>. Among the Azerbaijanis of Georgia, for example, if the relatives of the baby want to name the child in memory of a deceased relative, a *molla* is invited to read a special prayer on this occasion. This is done in order to purge the name of the deceased, thus allowing it to pass to the child in a pure form. In many villages of the Abşeron peninsula, for instance, if parents want to name their child after a deceased relative, *sura* 36 of the Qur'an (*Ya-Sin*) is recited for the sake of the dead person's soul. Very often, however, this task is given to a *molla*, who is invited to recite some passages from the Qur'an in order to “relent” the dead and to receive his/her “agreement” to pass on his/her name to the newborn child.

In some cases, if parents wish to have a boy, but only have girls, the last baby girl is named either *Bəsti* (enough)<sup>30</sup>, *Qızıyetər* (enough of girls) or *Kifayyət* (enough, full). In some regions the child's name is whispered into its ears by the parents or relatives right after its birth. In Şəki, parents turn the child towards Mecca for this purpose and whisper the chosen name into its ears, uttering the following formula:

<sup>27</sup> As a result of this tradition, chosen names were often meaningless. For example, a female name that is still popular in Azerbaijan, *Tükəzban*, originates from the Arabic verb in the dual form *tukadhbibān* (lit. “both of you consider something untrue”). This verb is used as a refrain in *sura* 55 (“*al-Raklmān*”) of the Qur'an. Explaining the origin of this name, Osman Mirzəyev, in his turn, refers to the repetition of this verb during local funeral ceremonies. Since this verb aurally resembles traditional Azerbaijani female names such as *Ummürbanu*, *Xurşidbanu*, *Şərəbanu*, so he holds, many illiterate people simply adopted it to their purposes without understanding its real meaning (cf. Mirzəyev 1986: 224–225).

<sup>28</sup> In Ordubad, in contrast to other regions of Azerbaijan, it is a tradition to name the newborn child after its living father (Pashaev 1998: 135).

<sup>29</sup> It is believed that this can lead to the death of the relative in question. Massé refers to the same tradition among the Persians (Massé 1954: 28).

<sup>30</sup> Massé gives an account of the same practice among Iranian Azerbaijanis, saying that “when there are a great many girls in a family, the seventh is called *qız-bes* – enough girls, in the hope that the next child will be a boy” (*ibid.*).

*Onun adını biz verdik, taleyini Allah versin!*

(We have given to him/her the name; let Allah give to him/her the destiny!)

In many Abşeron villages a party known as *şəbbə-xeyir* is given once a baby has reached forty days of age (Həvilov 1991: 220). On this occasion close relatives and friends of the family gather, and each guest brings a gift for the baby, a sheep and some gold accessories (a bracelet or a chain for a boy, earrings for a girl). On the same day, the ears of the baby girl are pierced to put on the earrings. As regards boys, circumcision is sometimes also performed on the fortieth day. If the name chosen for the child is the name of a deceased relative, *balva*, a dish traditionally associated in Azerbaijan with mourning repast sessions (Sattarov 2009), is cooked along with other festive dishes. Then, by pronouncing the phrase *halallıq olsun!* (Let this be permitted!), the parents ask the *molla* to recite the Qur'an in a mosque for the sake of the deceased (Nəbiyev 1993: 76). On the same day relatives and neighbours who, for some reason or another, have not been able to have children for a long time sacrifice a sheep. The meat is then distributed among seven neighbours or close friends together with small gifts (*ibid.*).

Usually the right to name a newborn baby lies with one of the close relatives, for which he/she is presented with a gift. If it is the first child of a young couple, it is usually named either after its father or after close relatives on the part of its father. The relative who is chosen to name the child holds it, recites the *şahada* to its ears, followed by the chosen name and, finally, he/she says the following phrase:

*Al uşağı, ver uşağı, Tanrı saxlasın bu uşağı!*

(Take the child, give the child, let God preserve this child.)

Then he/she passes the child on to the next person in the circle, and in this way the baby is handed around among all those present at the party, with each person pronouncing the above-mentioned formulas (*ibid.*) in turn. After this ceremony, the baby is returned to the mother, while all the guests congratulate her by uttering one of the following phrases:

*Adı ilə böyülsün!* (Let him/her grow with his/her name!)

*Böyük oğlan/qız olsun!* (Let him/her be a big boy/girl!)

*Toyunu görək!* (Let us see his/her wedding!)

In the Nabran region the baby is usually named once its hair and nails have been cut on the fortieth day after birth. The name is pronounced into the right ear of the baby seven times. In the case of a male baby this is followed by the circumcision rite, after which it is taken to the local *pir* for blessing. In Nabran, the most venerated *pir* is an old oak tree located at a water spring which is known as a holy site of interconfessional importance (Sattarov 2006). The child is given water from this spring and a thread is tied to this tree for the child to be healthy. In Baku, when all the guests have gathered for the party, the mother brings her

child to a female *molla* who declares the desired name to the child. Then she recites the formula of the *shabada* and other prayers into its ears.

### Conclusion

Beliefs and rituals connected with childbirth constitute a first stage in the complex of so-called rites of passage related to transitional stages in the lives of the Azerbaijani Turks such as circumcision, marriage and death. It should be noted, however, that in modern Azerbaijan many beliefs and rituals described in this paper have already started to lose their significance. This process is especially noticeable in the urban areas, and in Baku in particular. Nevertheless, some of the discussed rituals continue to be practiced, even though they are gradually losing their symbolic meaning.

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