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# RELIGIOUS AND SYMBOLIC MEANING OF KAZAKH POPULAR BELIEFS AND TABOOS

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## Abstract

This article presents the concepts of popular belief and taboo, their essence and meaning, and examines as well the historiography of the problem. It identifies the religious and mythological connotations of these concepts, analyses their historical origins and focuses on the religious and symbolic content of some Kazakh popular beliefs and taboos. Such issues, as motherhood, childbirth and infancy, are highlighted in particular. The authors conclude that in the life of the Kazakh people, for centuries, systems of popular beliefs and taboos have been shaped, which are widely reflected in their everyday life, customs, and traditions. For a long time, they remained living and were passed through the generations. The article reports that some changes in the meaning of these popular beliefs and taboos have occurred at present and the scope of their application has been narrowed.

*Keywords:* taboo, religion, myth, symbol, religious

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## 1. Introduction

In the context of globalization, it becomes particularly important to modernize the system of popular beliefs and taboos employed for the upbringing of the future generation. Kazakh popular beliefs and taboos that have existed for centuries are widely represented in everyday life, customs, traditions and minds of the Kazakh people, which are among the key issues for the population of Kazakhstan now. The people wonder not only about their pragmatic meaning (rituals and ceremonies) but also about their origin. This becomes especially important when it comes to family traditions and customs related to human life's milestones, such as childbirth.

Kazakh family education begins with popular beliefs and taboos. Every family from birth to death obeys numerous ones, giving a certain meaning to one or another action.

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Traditions and customs of the Kazakh people have long drawn the attention of historians, ethnographers and local history experts. The first among those who conducted fundamental research on Kazakh ethnography were Kazakh scholars. Here, it is necessary to mention I. Altynsarin ('An essay on customs of the marriage proposal and wedding in the charter on the Orenburg Kirgiz') [1], C. Valikhanov ('Traces of shamanism in the Kyrgyz people') [2], as well as A. Divayev ('From Kyrgyz beliefs. Baksy as a doctor and magician' and 'Kyrgyz lullabies') [3, 4]. Kazakh customs and traditions were investigated by several Russian researchers: R. Karuts in 'Among the Kyrgyz and Turkmen in Mangyshlak' [5], A. Levshin in 'Description of the Kirghiz-Cossacks, or Kirghiz-Kaisati, ordas and steppes' [6], A. Brem in 'Everyday and family life of Kyrgyz people' [7] and N. Kalmakov in 'Selected Kyrgyz family customs in the northern districts of the Syrdarya region' [8].

During the Soviet period, special comprehensive research concerning the ethnography of the Kazakh people was conducted. It includes the works of K. Arginbaev ('Folk customs and popular beliefs of the Kazakhs, associated with cattle breeding') [9], V. Vostrov ('The remains of ancient beliefs in Kazakhs revisited') [10] and E. Masanov ('An essay on history of ethnographic studies of the Kazakh people in the USSR') [11].

In the years of independence, the interest in this topic significantly increased. Numerous ethnographic studies in this field were performed, including 'Traditions and customs of the Kazakh people' [12, 13], 'Tradition: yesterday, today and tomorrow' by K. Begmanov [14], 'Traditions and customs of the Kazakh people' by S. Kenzheahmetula [15], 'Kazakh traditions and customs' by A. Tauuly [16], 'Essays' by A. Seydimbek [17], 'Mentality and traditions' by D. Aidarov [18], 'Keep customs and respect traditions' by K. Makin [19] and 'From wooden cradle to earth cradle' by A. Nusipkosaauly [20].

The analysis of the literary sources shows that the customs and traditions of the Kazakh people have been examined in a large body of studies. However, there are no special works concerning popular beliefs and taboos, which influenced the formation of traditions.

This article attempts to identify the origins and reasons for various popular beliefs and taboos, customs and rituals and to determine their religious and symbolic meaning.

## **2. The essence and interconnections between popular beliefs and taboos and their religious and mythological sources**

Before addressing the basis, origin, religious and symbolic content of popular beliefs and taboos of the Kazakh people, it is necessary to determine meaning and interconnections between the concepts of 'popular belief' and 'taboo'.

According to the well-known ethnographer B. Bopai, in most cases, taboos have mandatory (imperative) nature (for example, 'Do not tear young grass'). Popular beliefs, in turn, arise as an explanation for the taboo. A taboo

turns in a popular belief when it aims to be explained and interpreted to prevent ill acts and bad attitude: 'If you tear greens (young grass) – you will have bad luck from youth'. Kazakh taboos are not formulated in the plural, because a taboo is addressed to everyone personally. "This is a fount of knowledge, which is mandatory for every Kazakh. These bits of knowledge are the source of the national upbringing." [21] Therefore, popular beliefs and taboos are interrelated.

The ethics of behaviour dominates in popular beliefs, while taboos aim to warn against mistakes and ignorance. Moreover, popular beliefs encode the good/evil dichotomy (for example, if a swallow built a nest in one's dwelling, this is a good sign; if a night owl visited the house, it is a sign of misfortune). As a result, an event becomes a reason for a purification rite.

From the psychological point of view, popular beliefs and taboos are a kind of archaic superstitions that originated in thinking. These psychological features of the perception of being by nomads were developed in the process of the formation of the ethnos. Popular beliefs and taboos deal with the place of women, boys and girls, senior and junior members, as well as of other groups in an ethnic community.

Many traditions, customs, rituals, popular beliefs and taboos of the Kazakh people are associated with religious ideas. Popular beliefs and taboos, legends and myths concerning sacred spiritual values originate in both the holy Quran and the lives of prophets [22, 23]. They also echo the remains of pagan beliefs (tengrism, shamanism, etc.).

Popular beliefs never oppose religion. Thus, if Islam calls for patience, Kazakhs say 'Restraint is gold'. Islam calls for integrity and prosperity, which is consistent with Kazakh aphorism 'Integrity and wealth lead to joy and cheer'. The call for forgiveness and tolerance is equivalent to Kazakh folk wisdom 'If you were asked for forgiveness, you can forgive the death of your father'. The call for good deeds is echoed in the proverb 'Every man must repay good for good but only a strong man can repay good for evil'. When Islam encourages good and benevolent speeches, Kazakhs say, 'One kind word ennobles thousands and one cruel word separates thousands'. Thus, the popular beliefs of Kazakhs in the form of proverbs and sayings determine the ethical standards for the youths and shape people's worldview [24].

Most of the surviving popular beliefs and taboos are related to pagan idolatry. For example, the rite of purification by fire originates from the faith in the sacred power of fire. This rite emerged on the basis of ancient animistic and totemic beliefs of Kazakhs. Purification by fire is performed in the form of various rituals against the evil eye, damage, and other negative effects. In this context, purification ('alastau') is understood as 'purification by fire'. It was believed that all diseases come from the collision with supernatural forces – the devil. The nomads purified by fire their dwelling (yurt), household items, and cattle after each migration. The fire was used to purify a cradle, doorway and other prominent locations with the use of magic spells, such as 'purify, protect from disease, evil eye and evil spirits'. This rite is conducted by knowledgeable and learned in medicine people. Moreover, the rite of purification by fire is used

for hygiene, preventive care and general health improvement. It was performed in cattle-pens in the event of animal diseases and threats of various epidemics.

### **3. Kazakh popular beliefs and taboos related to motherhood and childbirth**

Among the most numerous are customs, rituals, popular beliefs and taboos associated with motherhood and childbirth, beginning with the celebration of the conception of a child accompanied by the distribution of sweets and blessing of the young daughter-in-law. Young female neighbours, daughters-in-law and friends prepared special dishes for her. The mother-in-law tied a white handkerchief to the right side of the doorframe, which was a sign of the daughter-in-law's pregnancy, intended "for the deceased ancestors and spirits to protect the daughter-in-law" [25]. From that moment on, the mother-to-be was treated with special honour and care; she was considered the most attractive and respectable.

To celebrate the future childbirth, the Kazakh people cooked a special dish ('zharys kázan') [26]. In Kazakh families, the nutrition of a mother-to-be was strictly controlled according to popular beliefs:

- a mother-to-be was fed with her favourite meals for the child to be curious and intelligent;
- a mother-to-be was not shown the blood of sacrificial animals for the child not to be cruel;
- a mother-to-be was not given rabbit meat to avoid the appearance of a 'cleft lip' in the baby;
- camel meat was excluded from her diet, otherwise, as it was believed, the pregnancy could last up to twelve months.

From the last popular belief, another emerged: in case of overdue pregnancy, the mother-to-be was walked under a camel for several times "to deliver the child as soon as possible" [27].

For protection against the evil eye, a young mother is decorated with amulets, beads and pendants. Seven small stones shaped in triangular amulets are attached under her collar. This resulted in a popular saying "let the evil eye fall on the stone" (*til-kíziń tasqa*) [27, p. 11-12]. To neutralize the possible negative impact of the evil eye or witchcraft, the expectant mother undergoes treatment, which included purification by the smoke of medicinal herbs (*peganum* or *juniper*), salt and fire; pieces of red cloth are tied to visible places, objects and things.

On the day of birth, the neck bones of the sacrificial animal (*qalzha*) are separately boiled. Women tear flesh from the bones not with their teeth, but with their fingers. Then, with wishes of early strength to the new-born's neck, the bones are tied to the upper part of the door. These bones are not removed until the baby's neck becomes stronger. This rite is quite widespread at present as well, especially in families including representatives of older generations. Ethnographer A.T. Toleubaev emphasized that, according to this popular belief,

if the bones are not thoroughly cleaned from meat, this leads to eye inflammation in the new-born [28].

#### **4. Kazakh popular beliefs and taboos associated with infancy**

In order to protect a new-born against the evil eye and damage, Kazakhs follow numerous popular beliefs and taboos. Thus, the young mother is responsible for the cradle protection procedures involving the use of fire and metal. For this reason, in Kazakhstan until now, one might find cradles with traces of ritual fire. There is a belief that one should place a knife under the baby's pillow when it is left unattended. To protect the child against the evil eye, it is painted with coal soot and is not shown to strangers. To protect the baby, various amulets are used, for example, a paw of a wolf, golden eagle or horse hung in the head of the cradle. In ancient times, a hedgehog skin was hung under the cradle. The child's headwear was decorated with owl feathers [29]. In new-born care, the young mother was expected to follow all rituals and taboos, which was strictly controlled by the older family members. One of the most important taboos is related to baby feeding. According to it, a mother should not feed her baby with her head uncovered, because evil spirits can mix the dirt from the woman's hair with her milk. As a result, the child will grow a naughty and soulless person [25, p. 23].

Numerous Kazakh popular beliefs are related to the naming of new-borns. If in a family, children died in infancy, the new-borns were given either unflattering names such as Kushik ('Puppy'), Itemgen ('Fed by dog'), Malay ('Footman') or, on the contrary, names, associated with longevity Tursin ('Let him live!'), Aman ('Be healthy!'), Olmes ('Immortal', etc.). In general, this was associated with protection against the evil eye and damage. If in a family, girls were born one after another, a child was given a name referring to the subsequent birth of a boy Ulbolsyn ('Let it be a boy!'), Ultu ('Give birth to a son!'), etc. A long-awaited child was named Allabergen, Aldabergen, Kudaybergen ('Given by God'), Tuyaq ('Descendant'), etc. To grow up brave and strong, a baby was named in honour of totemic animals or birds – Kaskyrbai ('Wolf'), Burkitbai ('Golden eagle'), etc. [30]. For a child to be beautiful and have a bright, pure soul, it was given names such as Aizhan ('Moon soul') and Zhuldyzbay ('Shining like a star') [31]. With care about the child's future and wishes of wealth the name Sansyzbay ('Uncountable wealth') is associated, with the wish of respect – Omirbek, Kadirbek, with the wish of wisdom and knowledge – Galymbek, Danabek, with the wish of courage – Batyr, Arystan, Zholbarys, with the wish of longevity – Kepzhasar, etc. [32].

According to Kazakh popular beliefs, the first 40 days of a baby's life are a difficult transitional period, during which it has to be kept under constant control. The new-born is dressed in special clothes sewn inside out – 'it kilek' for girls or shirt ('it zheide') for boys. During this period, the hair or nails of the child aren't cut. The baby is bathed exclusively in salt water due to the belief that it will allow the child to grow up a balanced and resilient person, able to

overcome any life obstacles. In 40 days, a celebration is arranged for the true, second birth of a child, the birth in the real world (shildekhana). It is held a day before the deadline for boys (with wishes for the fastest development and independence) and the day after the deadline for girls (with wishes of seriousness and responsibility) [32]. The concept of ‘shilde’ is associated with the sacred number 40. In the mythopoeic idea, there is the concept of ‘40 shilten’ – patrons, guardians of batyrs (brave men, outstanding warriors; an honorary title among the Turks given for military exploits), who play the role of holy spirits. In the age of the formation of animism, parents ‘put their child under the care of 40 shilten’. Thus, shildekhana means putting a child under the care of 40 shilten. Therefore, shildekhana is considered in two ways: as 40 days from the birth of a child and as an assignment of a child under the auspices of 40 holy spirits [33]. At celebrations on this occasion, the baby’s hair and nails are cut and it is bathed in 40 spoons of water, which symbolized fullness and abundance. At the bottom of the bathtub, silver jewellery and coins are placed, which symbolized purity and sinlessness. It was also believed that water with silver is clean and can protect the baby against evil forces. After 40 days, the baby is solemnly shown to people. Its inside-out clothes are removed, filled with sweets and tied around a dog’s neck (the dog is a totem animal), which is later released so that older children chase after it (and sweets). Regarding this popular belief, S. Kondibay notes the following in his research on the mythology of proto-Kazakhs: “Until to 40 days a new-born does not belong to the earthly world. In 40 days, he comes in our mortal life. The presence of a dog in these rites is not accidental: 1) the dog symbolizes the soul of an unborn person, 2) the dog is the guardian in the other world, and 3) the dog symbolizes the souls of the deceased. The presence of a dog in a new-born’s life, calling a baby’s clothing ‘a dog’s clothing’, tying the baby’s clothing around the dog’s neck – all this is not accidental. These are three inextricably linked ethnographic concepts.” [34] Since the ancient times, a Kazakh belief has existed: with a high risk of early infant mortality, clothing, designated for a new-born, is first put on a dog’s face and only then on the infant. It is believed that this rite will save the child, so the clothing is called ‘a dog’s shirt’. Kazakhs called a new-born ‘tumak’ (not yet born), so the dog was a link between the real world and the other world, acting as the patron and custodian for the baby. In addition, a woman, who wanted to have a child, stepped over young puppies. If one of the puppies died soon after this, it was assumed that the woman was to become a mother soon. Besides, Kazakhs have a taboo on mistreating a dog – one cannot kick it or splash it with water. It was believed that in a person who sprayed a dog with water, numerous warts appeared.

The next rite associated with infancy is ‘besik toy’ (celebration of the cradle). A child is put in the cradle after shildekhana: before it, it is kept in swaddling clothes. The rite of putting a new-born in the cradle dates back to the nomadic lifestyle and is not found in other nations. There are various legends related to the origin of the cradle (besik). The first cradle was made of tobilga (shrub with very strong crimson wood), for which the latter is honoured as a

sacred plant. Kazakhs used it to make not just cradles but also kamcha (lash) and wooden kitchen utensils. There are taboos concerning the burning of a cradle, leaving it at the door and the necessity to keep it safe – all of them are related to the sacrality of tobilga. Before putting the child in the cradle, the rite of purification by fire, juniper smoke or seven lit matches [25, p. 26] is performed, otherwise, evil spirits might disturb the child, making them sickly and capricious.

There is a custom to present a first-born of the married daughter with a cradle. Furthermore, the mother of the pregnant woman prepares the contents of the cradle, as well as gifts, jewellery and tasty treats for the festive dastarkhan. The number of gifts (nine) is symbolic; the presents include both expensive clothes and small items. Guests of the celebration have a conversation at the dastarkhan, after which the ceremony of putting the child in the cradle has performed. The honourable right to put the child in the cradle is given to an elderly woman, respected in the neighbourhood. In the beginning, a complex ritual of the bedding preparation is performed with the distribution of sweets and coins to the women present. The guests esteem the baby's dowry and give presents to those who give presents. The mothers-in-law exchange gifts in the form of bracelets and rings [32].

The cradle decoration includes seven layers – blanket (korpe), shapan (robe, national clothes; among Kazakhs, the tradition of giving shapans to respected people is very popular), bedmatt (kebenek), fur coat, bedspread, bridle and kamcha (whip) – and each layer has its own meaning. A fur coat, shapan and bedspread put in the cradle symbolize a wish to achieve honour and respect, a bridle and blanket – for a child to grow up as a defender of their country [27, p. 17].

There is a strict taboo on rocking an empty cradle. According to legends, Satan (Iblis) lays down his child in an empty cradle and, therefore, rocking an empty cradle is equivalent to lulling Satan's child. It is also believed that a bunch of owl feathers or wolf's tooth and in some regions hung to the cradle protect a child against the evil eye and damage. This belief is associated with totemic ideas about an owl and a wolf as a sacred bird and a sacred animal [35].

Another ritual associated with infancy – cutting of ropes – is dedicated to the first steps of a child. According to A.S. Pangereev, this ceremony originates in the magical beliefs of Kazakhs. The latter state that if one cuts the ropes of a child who takes their first steps to a special song performed by a respected person, the child will learn to walk quickly and confidently [33]. The ropes were made of green grass (with wishes of prosperity) and of the colon of animals (with wishes of wealth). Now, they are made of patchy (black and white) threads. It is believed that the white thread symbolizes life and the black thread – the line between the real world and the other world. Thus, the black and white thread is the boundary between life and death. In the process of bathing, putting a child in the cradle and cutting the ropes, the names of the holy women were pronounced – “Bibi Fatima, Bibi Zuhra, Umai Ana” associated with the period of worship to holy spirits and animistic concepts [33, p. 30-31].

## 5. Conclusions

Popular beliefs and taboos are historically established ethnocultural and social concepts, which encode folk worldview. For centuries, they have accompanied the Kazakh people and firmly penetrated the system of their cultural and spiritual values. Kazakh popular beliefs and taboos are sources of national ethics, ethno-pedagogics and rules for living, present in different spheres of life. They are used as guidance and warning against wrong deeds. They occupy a special place in the national education of the Kazakh people.

The transfer of popular beliefs and taboos from generation to generation has been carried out in connection with religious and mythological views. The source of popular beliefs and taboos related to motherhood and infancy is the beliefs of the people. The popular beliefs and taboos, reflected in material objects, actions, meanings of words, and certain images, have a deeply religious and symbolic meaning.

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