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THE RITE OF PASSAGE AMONG KARAITE[1] TURKS: BIRTH

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Abstract: The word Karaim is derived from the Aramaic-Hebrew kara meaning to read with the plural suffix im. In Hebrew, קראים karaim means "those who read the scriptures". Over time, Karaite became the name of a Turkish tribe. Historical data indicates that the Karaites, descendants of the Khazar state, adhered to the Karai sect of Judaism, which recognized only the Torah. Consequently, due to their adoption of a distinct belief system, it is natural for the Karaites to exhibit differences in the rituals and customs associated with the "childbirth" phase, an important transitional period in human life. As is well known, the rituals performed during the transition period are designed to determine the new status of the newborn, to offer blessings, and to protect against perceived dangers and harmful influences that are believed to be particularly potent during this period. These practices constitute the fundamental elements of the cultural memory codes of the Karaite Turks. This study aims to explore and analyze both the basic beliefs of the Karaites regarding birth, which are rooted in Turkish culture, and the rituals that have been influenced by Jewish beliefs. By collecting information from individuals interviewed during field research (Karaite Turks residing in Lithuania and Crimea), the study seeks to determine whether there are any similarities between their customs, traditions, beliefs and practices and those observed in the present day and whether these ceremonies continue.

Keywords: Karaite Turks, Karaite faith, transition period, birth ritual, newborn, pregnancy, motherhood

INTRODUCTION

The Karai sect and the Karaite Turks are topics on which there is enough subject matter for several researchers. Due to their inclination to privacy and their isolated lifestyles, there is not adequate information on the origin of the Karaite Turks, their reason for choosing Karaism, or simply the way they carry out their rituals. In this study, we aim to find answers to some of these questions according to the information we have gathered and analyzed. Firstly, the basic birth-themed beliefs of the Karaites in Crimea and Lithuania, originating from Turks, and their rituals blended with Judaism, were analyzed together. During the analysis, the differences that originated from contact with different geography and cultures drew attention, as well as the similarities between the birth transition period practices of the Karaites (Atmaca 2023: 174–184; Atmaca et al. 2023: 1–2). Field research using observation and interview techniques was carried out when gathering this information with three people residing in Trakai, Lithuania, whom we consider as sources and assigned identification numbers such as 1, 2, and 3 in the main text. Whether there are similarities between customs, beliefs, traditions and contemporary practices and whether these rituals still endure were established based on the information given by the three people who were interviewed during the field research. Occurrences/situations were examined in their natural flow, and notes were taken throughout. Lastly, the works of Yuriy Aleksandroviç Polkanov, Crimea Scientific Council President, were considered particularly fundamental for the data obtained from the Crimean Karaite Turks (Atmaca et al. 2023: 1–2).

Birth, which holds a distinct place as a transitional ritual across various societies, is similarly revered among the Karaite Turks. Therefore, the primary focus of this study is to investigate the customs and cultural changes coming into the world among the Karaite Turks residing in Lithuania and Crimea, both before, during, and after the childbirth process.

BIRTH RITUALS AMONG KARAITE TURKS

Birth, a significant transition milestone in human life, signifies a “beginning”. It is a means of perpetuating human existence on Earth and an act of defiance against mortality. Birth gives the status of motherhood to women and father-

hood to men (actually, it changes the status of all the members of the family – grandparents, uncles, etc). It not only increases respect for women but also solidifies their position within the family, extended kin and society. Fathers, in turn, gain confidence in the future and elevate their standing among friends and relatives by "having a son" (Örnek 1966: 55–56). Since birth, as a biological event, is culturally interpreted variously across societies, a multitude of customs, beliefs, and magical practices are observed during birth (Ibid.). In this context, for the Karaites, birth is considered as a way for the Karaite Turkish lineage to gain strength, accompanied by the enactment of numerous customs and beliefs. It is seen that the Karaite Turks are directly influenced by the Karaite sect during this transitional phase. This is because of what is stated in Genesis 1: 28. The following statements in the section point out the importance of marriage status and having children on earth. "He blessed them and said, "Be fruitful and multiply; fill the earth and subdue it; have dominion over the fish in the sea, the birds in the sky, and every living creature on the earth" (The Holy Bible, New International Version, n.d., Genesis 1: 28).

RITUALS BEFORE CHILDBIRTH

Within the Lithuanian Karaite community, women who face infertility issues visit the kenesa, the Karaites' place of worship, and recite repentance prayers from the Psalms, a book of prayers and wisdom found in the Ketuvim section of the Hebrew Bible (SP 1). This information given by the informant reminds us that in Muslim Turkish Traditions, a woman who cannot become pregnant visits holy places such as tombs, religious shrines, etc. In the Dede Korkut Tales, we can find the origin of the understanding of being able to have children through repentance (SP 1). Since being childless is not considered to be a good thing among Oghuz Turks, Dirse Khan asks his wife to beg God and repent of her sins. This is because there is a belief that both God and society will disgrace those who have no children (Ergin 2018: 78–81). Apart from praying to find a cure for childlessness, Turkish culture employs various other methods such as organizing a toy[2], feeding the hungry, equipping the houses of poor families, freeing debtors from their debts, and visiting holy places (Gönen 2005: 107). At the end of the studies (Ögel 2020: 309) conducted on the beliefs related to the cult of ancestors, when tözler[3] and kurgan graves are considered, it is determined that death is not perceived as extinction in ancient Turkic beliefs and that people believe that there is a life that continues after death. The practices mentioned in literary texts such as "placing koumiss[4] in the grave for the dead to drink and meat for the dead to eat[5]" are reflections of this phenomenon (Ibid.: 310).

The origin of the tradition of visiting cemeteries is therefore related to the cult of ancestors, that is, the respect shown to ancestors (Çoruhlu 2012: 59). Additionally, if feasible, Lithuanian Karaite make pilgrimages to the *Balta Tiymez* (literal meaning: cutting trees are not allowed) cemetery located in the Kirk-Yer region of Bahçesaray, Crimea. At the entrance and exit of the cemetery, they kneel and pray in hopes of conceiving children. Out of reverence, they refrain from touching the trees in the cemetery. This cemetery's forest, named Balta Tiymez (Dubinski 2005: 49) is known for its oaks, which the Karaites consider to be ancestral roots symbolizing immortality. Each family within the cemetery has its own oak tree, and it is believed that the drying up or destruction of this tree signifies the decline of the family and the Karai lineage (Ibid.: 50, SP 1).

As in general with Turkic tribes, among the Karaites the value of women in families experiencing infertility is not diminished, and women are not blamed for their inability to have children. Women have a special place in the Karaite Turks sect (SP 1). The importance of women is mentioned in Genesis, one of the five parts of the Torah, as follows: "God created mankind in his own image... male and female he created them" (Genesis 1: 26–27). A second passage states that "God took one of the man's ribs and then made a woman from the rib and brought her to the man" (Genesis 2: 21–22). The passage continues: "She shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of Man; and they shall be one flesh" (Genesis 2: 23–24; The Holy Bible, New International Version, n.d.). Consequently, according to the Torah, man and woman together constitute a whole. And this is a greater and more valuable entity than their individual parts.

In families with many children, the youngest offspring are often entrusted to childless Karaite Turks relatives or families within the community who are recognized as legal parents, with all rights and responsibilities, to ensure the continuation of the lineage (SP 1).

According to the traditional structure in Anatolia, it is the youngest child who is the owner of the house. Moreover, the youngest male child is the one who maintains order in the family house. In Anatolian fairy tales, it is seen that the winner and the one who eventually takes the place of the father is invariably the youngest son, but here it is noteworthy that the youngest son is given to be adopted. However, according to Jewish tradition, the older child is blessed because he or she opens the uterine canal (the way leading to the womb) for the first time: "Reserve for Me all the first-born, whatsoever (openeth the womb) among the Children of Israel, both of man and of beast: it is mine" (Exodus 13: 2; The Holy Bible, New International Version, n.d.). Here the opening of the uterine canal is particularly important because the same sacredness does not apply to births by caesarean section. The difference is in how caesarean births are regarded. The hearth (fire) is the symbol of the continuity of the home and

family life and is considered masculine in Turkish traditions. The title of the prince of the hearth, Od-Tegin, is used for the youngest male children in Turkish culture (Çoruhlu 2012: 53). There is a tradition of adoption among the Turks, and according to ancient beliefs, *cedd-i âlâ* (the old ancestors) do not allow a non-blood foreigner to be introduced in the family. It is possible to see some traces of the tradition of adoption, which is an old practice in Turkish culture, in the Manas Epic. Almanbet, the son of Kalmyk Khan, is adopted by Manas' father and mother (İnan 2020: 310).

For the Sephardic Jews, prenatal preparations have a religious significance, and the expectant mother organizes a special ceremony at home at the end of the fifth and seventh month of pregnancy. At the party, the baby's clothes are prepared, and this is called "kortadura de fashadura" among Sephardic Jews. During this ritual, some kinds of implementations and practices are employed, such as throwing sugar, rice, and money with the wish that the baby will be healthy, happy and fertile (Güre 2015: 30). The objects (sugar, money and rice) are handed over to the mother or grandmother, or they are thrown at the baby. The throwing of these items takes place with the intention of wishing the baby and mother health, prosperity, and happiness. Sugar is thrown to symbolize sweetness and a happy life for the child; rice is tossed for fertility and abundance, and money is thrown to bring wealth and good fortune.

RITUALS DURING CHILDBIRTH

Within the Karaite Turks community, the birth of a child is regarded as a source of pride and blessings for the Karaite Turkish nation. The arrival of a child, who represents the future of the nation, the inheritor of ancestral possessions, and the continuance of the lineage, is met with special joy.

The Karaite Turks adhere to various taboos, prohibitions and restrictions aimed primarily at safeguarding the well-being of pregnant women and their unborn children. For example, among the Crimean Karaite Turks, pregnancy is only disclosed to close relatives due to concerns about potential harm to the expectant mother and the baby (Suleymanov 2012: 110). The expectant mother takes precautions to avoid any behaviors that may negatively impact her baby from the moment of conception. According to a prevailing belief among the Crimean Karaite Turks, a pregnant woman should not pass over a rope, tie, or under a tree branch. If she accidentally does so, she recites several pages of prayers from the Psalms as an act of repentance (SP 1). Alternatively, she may utter the following prayer: *Aziź Tieńri, chajyfsunhej,* meaning "may Almighty God have mercy" and *kudraty kiplik sunhej*, meaning "may His ten mighty

powers grant strength" and *tiuź išliargia konušturhej*, meaning "may He lead to righteous deeds" (Firkovicius 1998: 194).

It is a natural and universal feeling for women to act with the motive of protecting their offspring, whether born or not yet born, due to their maternal characteristics. With the influence of cultures and beliefs, this motive brought protection from invisible harmful beings (demonic beings), and it also brought along some taboos and avoidance. In Altai Shamanism, Erlik is among the harmful beings and in shaman prayers he is portrayed as whipping black snakes. According to Yakut beliefs, the first kam was a Black Shaman who, because of his arrogance, did not recognize the greatest god of the Yakuts. This shaman, whose body consisted of numerous snakes, had extraordinary power (Çoruhlu 2012: 184). In Turkish mythology, snakes are the guards of Erlik's palace (İnan 2020: 407). In the traditional folk imagination, there is a connection between the rope and the snake through association, since the ropes in shamanic costumes symbolize snakes.

Among the Crimean Karaite Turks, childbirth typically occurs at home, with the assistance of a traditional midwife from the community or an experienced woman who has undergone multiple childbirths. Given that Karaite Turks families were traditionally large (families with 8–10 children were common), there were usually enough helpers available (SP 2). In contrast, among the Lithuanian Karaite Turks, only the midwife is informed about the impending childbirth, as it is believed that if others are informed, the expectant mother will suffer greatly. Until the late 19th century and early 20th century, even the presence of a male doctor during childbirth was inconceivable, and it was firmly stated that only a woman should attend to the delivery (SP 1).

RITUALS AFTER CHILDBIRTH

Although gift-giving is not of great importance among the Karaites, they do not visit the home of a newborn child empty-handed, and various cultural practices are observed. According to an old Karaite folk tradition, the child is traditionally presented with raw chicken eggs as gifts. The meaning of this gift is explained in different ways by the Karaites. The egg is considered a symbol of the continuous chain of life and rebirth, represented by the sequence of "animate-inanimate-animate" (Karakaş 2021: 46; SP 1). Among the Crimean Karaite Turks, the newborn child is given the egg white of a blessed raw chicken egg as a life-giving elixir, and the baby's head is bathed with egg yolk. Among Lithuanian Karaite Turks, the baby's head is washed with egg yolk mixed with saltwater (SP 1).

During the head washing ritual with egg yolk, it is customary to express wishes for the child to have a clean, round, white and healthy life, symbolizing the characteristics of an egg (Polkanov 1995: 72; Altınkaynak 2006: 79).

The use of the egg as a symbol of "productivity" and "regeneration" in all rituals performed to achieve certain goals in Turkish folk culture can be considered a modern-day application of archaic elements. Yakut Turks believe that good shamans will be brought to earth by an eagle. According to this belief, an eagle that swallows the soul of the child who will become a shaman comes to the forest and lays an egg on the branch of a red pine, beech or hornbeam tree, and a child is born from this egg (Karakaş 2021: 33). In a myth narrated by Kashgarli Mahmud, according to the belief of the Turks, when a kerkes bird gets old, it lays two eggs and sits on them. A dog named Barak hatches from one of these eggs. Another baby hatches from the second egg, but Kashgarli Mahmud does not mention what it is (Ögel 2010: 191). The egg represents the soil with its yolk, the fertility of the soil with its white, the water and the fire, which is the symbol of health and well-being due to its red colour, and reproduction and fertility taken as a whole (Koca 2012: 123). In many societies, the egg can be seen as taking part in rituals and ritual practices. The egg is a sign of creation, a symbol of the birth of the universe (cosmogony). It is mentioned that the perception of time in the Jewish religion differs from other religions. "The reference point of time is cosmology" (Kalın 2005: 17). Based on the desire for eternal life or the belief in immortality, the egg, which symbolizes a cyclical eternal life, comes forth as a reflection of this belief in folk practices. According to Anatolian Turkish traditions, drinking raw eggs for forty days to cure childlessness is one of the healing methods in folk medicine (Tanrıkulu 2017: 24–25).

Various postnatal practices are also observed after the birth of a child. One such practice is the hiding of the placenta. The placenta is regarded as an integral part of the child, and certain rituals are performed under the belief that it will influence the child (Örnek 2000: 142–143). The Karaites tied the cut umbilical cord of the baby with a string and then dried and stored it. In the Crimean Karaites, the mother would hide the dried navel and the bundle of hair from the first shave in a leather or cloth pouch and always carry it with her. According to this knowledge, the first shave would probably occur in the family house within the first few months after birth. It was believed that in this way the child would be protected from evil. In the 19th and early 20th centuries, the practice of carrying the bundle of hair in a locket was also observed (Altınkaynak 2006: 79). The mysterious symbolization of the practices related to the umbilical cord and hair for protection from evil and a good life is also seen in the birth rituals of the Karaites (Koçak 2021: 315).

While the ritual of salting the baby after birth is a common practice in traditional births in Anatolian folklore, the fact that today's births take place in a hospital environment has eliminated the salting ritual. These rituals, which were performed with the belief that the baby would not smell sweat in the future and that its skin would be healthy and strong, were not seen in our study area (Karaite Turks residing in Lithuania and Crimea) (SP 1).

BREASTFEEDING PRACTICES AMONG THE KARAITES

In Judaism, it is required for a mother to breastfeed her children for twenty-four months (Koçak 2021: 319). Karaite scholar Bünyamin en-Nihavendi states that the weaning age of the child is three (Arslantaş 2011: 400). Unlike En-Nihavendi's view, Karaite Turks state that if the woman is healthy after birth, she should breastfeed the baby until seven to eight months of age. It is a custom among Karaite Turks to separate the baby from its mother's breast after the specified time (Koçak 2021: 319, SP 1).

Within the Karaite Turks community, a Karaite woman with abundant breast milk may breastfeed children from other religions and act as a wet nurse (SP 1). These wet nurses care for these children as if they were their own and raise them alongside their children (Sarach et al. 2007: 160–161). In fact, according to the legends of the Crimean Karaite Turks, they have many sisters from the Giray dynasty, which ruled in Crimea (Polkanov & Polkanova 2005: 106)[6]. In this context, milk siblings are not allowed to marry because they are considered relatives.

MEASURES TO PROTECT MOTHER AND CHILD

According to the book of Leviticus, "Say to the Israelites: A woman who becomes pregnant and gives birth to a son will be ceremonially unclean for seven days, just as she is unclean during her monthly period. Then the woman must wait thirty-three days to be purified from her bleeding. She must not touch anything sacred or go to the sanctuary until the days of her purification are over" (The Holy Bible, New International Version, n.d., Leviticus 12: 2, 4). Likewise, "if she gives birth to a daughter, for two weeks the woman will be unclean, as during her period. Then she must wait sixty-six days to be purified from her bleeding" (Ibid., Leviticus 12: 5). Among the Crimean Karaite Turks, there are cultural practices that protect the mother and child during the first 40 days after birth: they are restricted from traveling long distances, going on visits to someone

else's house or being exposed to strangers during this period. It is also religiously forbidden for a woman who gave birth to go to a kenesa, or cemetery or touch sacred things. The duration of this prohibition is 33 days if the woman gives birth to a boy and 60 days if she gives birth to a girl. In Lithuanian Karaite Turks' customs, this period is 40 days for mothers of boys (SP 1).

According to Turkish folk beliefs, the mother and her baby may be vulnerable and weak because they are in a transitional phase. During this period, the mother and her baby, who are vulnerable, are protected for 40 days in order to protect them from evils such as *albastı* (puerperal fever) / black eye and evil eye. According to Anatolian folk beliefs, the grave of a puerperant woman stays open for 40 days.

Among the Karaites of Israelite origin, the period for a woman to conclude her puerperium is marked by the naming of the child. Once this time arrives, the woman undergoes a ritual bath in a basin where her husband pours three buckets of water over her from head to toe, while uttering the words "be clean" each time; after this cleansing bath, the woman is considered purified (Arslantaş 2011: 396; Koçak 2021: 315). On the other hand, Karaites of Turkish origin consider a woman clean six weeks after giving birth to a boy and twelve weeks after giving birth to a girl (Firkovicius 1993: 50). Until this purification period elapses, the woman refrains from attending kenesa services and engaging in mundane activities. Once the prescribed period concludes, the woman prays to a hazan (religious man)[7] after performing the appropriate washing and purification rituals, signifying her state of purification (Koçak 2021: 315).

Here, water, a symbol of nature, holds significance as it represents both physical and spiritual cleansing and renewal, akin to its vitalizing properties. Purification with water always has the same effect: everything dissolves in water. Every 'form' breaks down, everything created loses its existence (Eliade 1959: 2015).

The vulnerability of both mother and baby during the transition of childbirth has given rise to the development of traditional protective practices among the Karaite Turks. These post-birth rituals are performed to ensure the health and well-being of the mother and child and to secure the child's longevity, happiness and future peace of mind. As a result, special protection is afforded to the young mother and her child during the initial 40 days after birth, a period which is also supported by the directives of the Karaite sect. Within the Karaite Turk community, these 40 days are considered the most critical and sensitive phase for the new mother and her newborn child (SP 1). Like practices observed in Anatolia, Karaite Turks adhere to specific customs during this period. The Anatolian belief of not leaving the woman who has just given birth alone for 40 days, in fear of an evil entity known as *alkızı*, *alkarısı* or *albası*, which is

thought to cause puerperal fever, resonates with some aspects of the Karaite traditions. Red-colored objects related to the spirit of '*Al*' are attached to the room, bed or clothes of the puerperant and the child to take precautions against *Alkarısı/Albastı*. Among the Karaites, the mother and child are restricted from traveling long distances, going on visits or being exposed to strangers during the first 40 days after birth. Although the Karaites do not practice the tradition of using a red-colored cloth, (SP 3), they protect the child from evil spirits by tying a red cloth or rope to the cradle where the baby lies (SP 1). In Turkish culture, the belief regarding alkarısı is a belief seen throughout the entire Turkic world. According to Abdülkadir Inan, the connection between the spirit *al* and the colour *al* (red) goes back to the ancient beliefs of the Turks in the god of fire and the guardian spirit (İnan 2020: 265). *Albastı* (puerperal fever) is an evil spirit that follows young girls and horses if the necessary measures are not taken, especially women who have just given birth. According to the belief, it feeds by eating the lungs of newborn children. For this reason, in Anatolia, a puerperant woman is never left alone, and objects believed to be protective (the Holy Quran, broom, iron rod, onion, a piece of wolf skin, harmal seeds, etc.) are placed in the room where the puerperant woman is. The puerperant woman ties a red cheesecloth, crown (head band), and ribbon on her head and red gifts are presented to the puerperant woman; food and drink containers are covered by red fabrics. According to Turkish culture, the colour red is the symbol of power and protection (Şimşek 2017: 106). Practices related to the colour red are carried out with the belief of protecting the puerperant woman from *albastı* / black eye and the evil eye. In Anatolia, similar practices are also followed for the bride. The veil on the bride's head is red, and both her head and face are covered, because the bride should be protected against evil spirits and the evil eye during this period.

It is also religiously forbidden for a woman who has given birth to go to a kenesa and cemetery (SP 2). Alternatively, the father may personally recite these psalms, facing the Wailing Wall (Western Wall), for the first 40 days after birth (SP 2; SP 3). These practices are believed to provide protection against malevolent entities, such as jinn, giants, evil spirits and diseases, safeguarding the mother and newborn from various forms of evil and misfortune.

In Karaites, a significant ritual surrounds the first outing of the newborn child from the house. This event is entrusted to the most respected members of the congregation (SP 1). The rationale behind this choice lies in the belief that the child will have a long life, hold a prominent position in age and seniority, and possess exceptional talents, as do the respected individuals who conduct the first outing (Sarach et al. 2007: 162).

THE CRADLE AMONG KARAITE TURKS

During the initial months of a newborn's life among the Karaite Turks, the infant is often placed in a cradle. The primary purpose of the cradle is to soothe and lull the baby to sleep, facilitating relaxation and comforting during transitions. The cradle is made of wood, and some parts are fixed only with wooden nails; iron nails are never used in the construction of the cradle, due to the belief that they are used in the construction of coffins, which evokes associations with death (SP 1). It is deemed unsuitable for the cradle to rest directly on the floor, as the floor has traditionally been regarded as a boundary between the mortal world and the realm of the departed. Therefore, suspending the cradle was considered a protective ritual, with the belief that elevating the child above the ground heightens the level of protection (SP 2). Additionally, in the past, Karai houses were relatively small, and hanging the cradle from the ceiling served to save space and efficiently use rising heat (SP 1; SP 3). Thus, cradles are commonly suspended from the ceiling, occasionally fixed to arched supports, and rarely placed on the floor. The cradle's base features a small, slightly sloping round hole through which a mattress with a hole in the center is placed beneath the child, and a deep clay pot is inserted under, ensuring that the infant remains clean and dry. The baby's legs are swaddled in cloth to maintain a straight position. The child is securely fastened within the cradle using special cradle tie (*beşik-bav*) bandages, which are often intricately embroidered with gold or colored silk (Isakovich 1893: 11–12). When breastfeeding the baby, a specially designed cover with a side opening is utilized, allowing the baby to be nourished without being removed from the cradle (Polkanov 1994: 24).

In Karai culture, the act of placing the baby in the cradle for the first time is considered highly significant. To mark this occasion, the Karaites arrange a ceremony known as the "cradle ceremony" (*beşik-toy*). According to tradition, the cradle is gifted by the eldest woman in the family. The ceremony is attended exclusively by women, who partake in a communal meal before the momentous act. The eldest and most esteemed wise woman among the gathering then places the baby in the cradle, accompanied by recitations of prayers from the Psalms (SP 1).

Karaites hold deep-rooted folk beliefs regarding the cradle and assign divine attributes to this symbolic item. For example, there is a strict prohibition against rocking an empty cradle, as it is seen as an omen signifying the likelihood of the child falling ill or facing a premature demise (SP 1). Cradles hold generational significance, passing down through ancestors and embodying the essence of ancestral heritage. Using a cradle in which brothers, fathers, grandfathers, and even great-grandfathers have grown up is considered auspicious for the child's

future life. In this context, a Karaite folklore legend called Cradle-Mountain ("Beşik-Tav") exemplifies the profound cultural significance attributed to the cradle[8].

The cradle is one of the most important material and cultural elements shaped around the baby. Except for the baby's sleep, the cradle is the baby's world, and it is a place in the world after the mother's womb where the baby should be made to feel comfortable and safe. And for this reason, the baby is entrusted to the tree, which is known to be sacred, that is, the cradle made of wood. It is thought that this understanding of sacredness is at the root of the taboos and abstinence related to the cradle in Turkish folk beliefs.

It is known that the tree is sacred in Turkish culture. However, the examples given show that the sacred bond between mother and baby includes the cradle made from the sacred tree.

CELEBRATIONS ON THE OCCASION OF THE BIRTH OF A BOY CHILD AND THE CIRCUMCISION CEREMONY

The prayers extend hopes for the boys "to have long lives, to obey their elders, and to become righteous sons who will witness the joys of raising their own children and grandchildren"; for girls "to be beautiful, to be devoted to their home and as wives, to raise good children and bring a valuable generation" (Firkovicius 1993: 50–53; Koçak 2021: 316). Hazan prays for a son as follows:

Uvul kaysı tuvdu ortımız, "the son born among us", *bolhey uzun künlü cımatımızda,* "may he be long-lived in our community", *Cuvat (response): Bolhey uzun künlü cımatımızda* "may he be long-lived in our community", *Biyi dunyaların xayıfsunhey,* "may the Lord of the worlds have mercy", *alhış sözlärimiz kabul bolhey,* "may our words of praise be accepted", *biz-dė yetişkėybiz yaxşısına* ,"may we also have your goodness" (Firkovicius 1993: 50–53).

Members of the Karaite sect show the necessary care in performing circumcision rituals. Judaism, as a divine religion, includes circumcision as a religious duty. Circumcision, or Brit Mila, is performed according to the principles set out in the Jewish holy book, the Torah, specifically Genesis 17: 9–12:

> *Then God said to Abraham, "As for you, you must keep my covenant, you and your descendants after you for the generations to come. This is my covenant with you and your descendants after you, the covenant you are to keep: Every male among you shall be circumcised. You are to undergo circumcision, and it will be the sign of the covenant between me and you. For the generations to come every male among you who is eight days old*

> *must be circumcised, including those born in your household or bought with money from a foreigner-those who are not your offspring"* (The Holy Bible, New International Version, n.d.).

Among Lithuanian Karaites, the circumcision ceremony is conducted within the confines of the home. The ceremony is attended by relatives, friends, neighbors, the hazan (religious leader), the community leader, and the circumciser. Similarly to other transitional events, the involvement of individuals from different religions or sects in the ceremony is not regarded favorably. Typically, the ceremony is presided over by a hazan or a specialized circumciser. The identity of the person performing the circumcision is not of utmost significance, as long as it occurs on the 8th day as prescribed by tradition. However, in remote and small Karaite villages, there may be challenges in ensuring the timely arrival of a hazan and a circumciser, and sometimes, out of necessity, a Crimean Tatar mullah is invited to perform the circumcision on time. Such cases occurred in the late 19th and early 20th centuries (SP 1).

Among the Crimean Karaites, the parents chosen for the circumcision ceremony are bestowed the honorary titles of "honorary father" (*sayğılı adam*) and "honorary mother" (*sayğılı hatın*) (SP 2). By prior arrangement, these esteemed individuals are invited to the ceremony. The guests gather in a designated room, much as in a wedding feast. The circumcision takes place in an adjacent room. The "honorary mother" hands the child to the "honorary father" on a pillow and waits at the entrance of the room where the ceremony unfolds. The "honorary father" takes a seat with the child on the pillow. Inside the room, the hazan recites a prayer commencing with the words *oğlum doğdu, byanç bizge* – "a son was born, this is a joy for us". The circumciser performs the procedure along with the necessary hygiene procedures. Once completed, the child is brought out of the circumcision room by the "honorary father" and returned to the care of the "honorary mother". Subsequently, she delivers the child to the biological mother (Sarach et al. 2007: 159).

At the invitation of the boy's father, guests are seated at the table. The hazan assumes a prominent position at the head of the table, and the festivities last for several hours. Initially, the men take their seats, followed by the women. The guests indulge in a meal consisting of cooked lamb, ak-halva, Karaite wine, and Karai grape vodka. During the event, guests offer gifts for the child, along with monetary contributions intended for later distribution to the needy. Young girls are excluded from participating in the circumcision ceremony and entertainment (SP 1).

CELEBRATIONS ON THE OCCASION OF THE BIRTH OF A GIRL CHILD

On the occasion of the birth of a girl child, the Karaites celebrate the event approximately two weeks after her birth, often on a Saturday. The celebration closely resembles that of a boy's birth, including the guests, beverages served, thanksgiving meals, and overall festivities. After the child's father visits the kenasa, the guests are invited to the house for the celebration. Initially, the men sit at the table, led by a hazan. During this meal, they express their good wishes for the girl's future, fortune, luck, and blessings. The hazan offers a prayer for the girl child:

> *Kügürçün kibik tügäl bolhey körkündä, "may she be perfect like a dove with her beauty," bu kız kaysı tuvdu abaylı kişiyi üvündä, "this girl born in the house of a worthy person," Alhışlanhey küçlü Tėnrinin alnında, "may she be blessed in the presence of the powerful god"* (Firkovicius 1993: 50–53).

CONCLUSION

Karaite Turks, who accept Karaism in the sense of "those who read/know the holy scripture", which is considered a sect of Judaism, have adopted their own understanding of religion within Judaism and Karaism, which accepts the Torah as the holy book and rejects the Talmud. In this respect, Talmudists had a different understanding from the Jews. On the stage of history, Karaite Turks have a place in the history of the Torah – the Hebrew holy book – and the Prophet Muhammad. They have a special place in Judaism with their belief in Moses, and in Turkish religious and cultural history with their Turkish origin. As in other Muslim and Christian Turkish communities, traditional Turkish religious beliefs and customs continued to exist among the Karaites (Arık 2005: 49).

The Karaite Turks adhere strictly to the Torah as well as incorporating various birth rituals that reflect Turkish culture and tradition. The birth of a baby holds significance among the Karaite Turks, as it brings a new member into the family, strengthens their cultural identity, and ensures the continuation of their lineage, family and nation. Consequently, it is the responsibility of all relatives and neighbors to provide special care, support and protection to the expectant Karaite mother during the prenatal, birthing, and postnatal periods.

In both Crimea and Lithuania, Karaite Turks have developed numerous beliefs and practices related to postnatal care for the mother and baby. These

practices are predominantly traditional and focus on healing and recovery. Although modernization has led to certain changes in ceremonial activities within birth rituals, some traditions have persisted. For example, enduring practices include blessing an egg as a birth gift for the newborn, preserving the placenta and umbilical cord after birth, and performing a naming ceremony for the infant. The foods consumed, treats offered, and garments worn during these rituals provide valuable insights into the daily lives of the Karaite Turks. These religious practices, deeply rooted in the beliefs, customs and culture of the Karaite Turkish people, have been passed down through generations and continue to evolve with time. Through our compilation of texts from the Karaite Turks, we have observed that some traditional practices, accumulated over the years, have endured, while others have begun to fade away. For example, traditions such as the situation where the young children of a family with many children are given to childless relatives/families of Karaite origin for the continuation of the generation; the Karaite mother not telling anyone except her closest relatives of the first months of her pregnancy; the newborn child being taken out of the house by the most respected people of the community first have not been continued.

SOURCE PERSONS

SP 1: Szymon Juchniewicz, 85, university graduate, retired, date and place of interview: May 15th, 2013 – July 12th, 2013, Lithuania/Trakai

SP 2: Dr. Markus Lavrinovicius, 80, university graduate, technical sciences, hazan (became the spiritual leader of the Lithuanian Karaites on July 10th, 2010), date and place of interview: May 15th, 2011, Lithuania/Trakai

SP 3: Diana Lavrinovicius, 33, university graduate, English teacher, date and place of interview: May 20th, 2013, Lithuania/Trakai

NOTES

[1] In the article, the word Karai refers to the Karaim sect, a sect of Judaism. The Karaites living in Lithuania use the word "Karaite" for both their sect and themselves. In the Turkish language, two vowels at the end of a word do not occur side by side. For this reason, /i/ > /y/ was converted into Turkish: Karai > Karay.

[2] The etymology and preliminary application of the term "toy" remain inadequately elucidated. Initially, this term was employed in the context of "state assembly, council, assembly" as a linguistic derivation from the religious observance referred to as "toy". Nevertheless, it progressively transformed to denote "feast, banquet, festive meal,

wedding" and analogous contexts. In the various written forms and dialects of Turkish, particularly in the variant spoken in Turkey, the term "toy" is prevalently utilized to signify "wedding, festival, feast". Conversely, in Azerbaijani Turkish, "toy" encompasses interpretations such as a "wedding ceremony, celebration, joyous gathering". In Turkmen, the term "toy" designates a grand feast, celebration, or event characterized by opulent festivities conducted in honor of an individual or entity. In Kyrgyz, the designation "toy" pertains to a feast, celebration, wedding banquet, or festival. In Kazakh, the term "toy" conveys interpretations such as festival, feast, banquet, or wedding. In New Uyghur, the word "toy" means "wedding", while in Sakha (Yakut), "toy" signifies meanings such as feast, banquet, celebration, or wedding ceremony. In Altai, the term "toy" denotes meanings such as festival, wedding, or wedding feast. In Karaim, the term "toy" is used to mean "wedding" or "feast", while in Uzbek, it signifies "entertainment" or "festivity" (Kartal et al., 2024: 15). There are three main rituals that take place during the life stages of an individual: birth ceremony (toy), marriage ceremony (toy) and death ceremony (toy).

[3] In the ancient Turkish belief system, this term is used to express respect or holiness to ancestor spirits, nature spirits (mountain, tree, animal, etc.). *Tös* means spirit. They are divided into pure, benevolent guardian spirits (*Aruu Tös*) and malevolent, dark, evil spirits (*Kara Tös*). Evil spirits (*Kara Tös*) are damaging. Evil Spirits (*Kara Tös*) are associated with negative connotations such as evil, darkness, disaster, disease. People try to drive away Evil Spirits (*Kara Tös*) with the help of protective rituals. *Aruu Tös*, also known as the benevolent spirits, are the kind of spiritual beings that were believed to bring goodness in the sense of fertility, health, and beauty and, of course, to shield people from evil. According to Altai Shamanic belief, these spirits exist in three places: underground, above ground and in the sky (Anohin 2006: 3–15).

[4] *Koumiss/kumis*: fermented mare's milk. The Central Asian peoples have long used this fermented beverage, which is prepared from mare's milk. Considered the drink of the ancestors, koumiss is especially served to guests and drunk on special occasions.

[5] There are many rituals related to the cult of ancestors in Turkish folk beliefs. They are done for the repose of the spirits of the deceased, out of respect for ancestors and to relieve anxiety about being harmed by spirits. Death is believed to be a part of life and a transition to life in the other world. This perspective sees death not as an end but as a new beginning. The devotion to the spirits of the ancestors is embodied in the rituals performed for the deceased.

[6] In the past, there was a strict religious rule among the Karaites regarding marriages with people of other religions (Suleymanov 2012: 117). In later times, due to the small population, marriages with representatives of other Turkic tribes (Tatars, Nogays, etc.) belonging to different religions were permitted. However, these Turkic tribes were required to accept the Karaite sect. According to Polkanov, one of the Crimean Karaite Turks, the Karaite community became more closed in the 16th century. Marriages were made only within this community or between Karaite representatives living in different countries (Polkanov 1994: 23). Since a woman and a man were considered the same and one body in marriage, a woman's brother and her husband were considered full brothers, not like brothers-in-law. Therefore, marriages between relatives of the same degree were also prohibited (Suleymanov 2012: 116, KK 1; Atmaca, 2023: 178).

[7] Religious man.

[8] In ancient times, the Karaites maintained a spiritual connection with the holy city of Jerusalem. They continue to include the prayer, "If I forget you, O Jerusalem, may my right-hand wither!" in their religious practices. However, for an extended period, the Karaites were unable to visit their holy land. Following the collapse of the Khazar

Khanate, Crimea fell under the control of bandit groups, and pirates were raiding ships in the Black Sea. The risky roads leading to the holy city also became impassable due to violent attacks by Arab Bedouins. Until the 11th century, no one from Crimea dared to embark on this challenging journey. Only forty locals, led by the aged Prince Musa, bravely set out on a pilgrimage to Jerusalem. His soul had yearned to visit the holy places for many years, and he finally decided to undertake the pilgrimage. At the end of an arduous journey, Prince Musa fulfilled his lifelong dream as he visited the ruins of Jerusalem, wept at the tombs of the patriarchs, poured out his troubles in front of the altar of Kenesa, and prayed for the people of Crimea in these sacred places. And having achieved the greatest fulfillment of his life, he began to prepare to return home. Before departing, a cleric from Jerusalem visited the prince. When the cleric saw a cradle made of Lebanese cedar among Haji Musa's belongings, he thought, "How can he carry a cradle on such a long journey?" Haji Musa read his guest's thoughts and calmly said, "I am bringing him a gift so that my grandson will be as famous as the cedar of Lebanon". Touched by these words, the cleric looked up to the sky and wished that the 'savior of the world' who would bring happiness, and goodness would be born in this cradle. But the old prince was unable to deliver his gift to his grandson. In 1002, Moses died on his way to Alexandria, on his way to visit the Karaites of Egypt. His cradle was brought from Jerusalem to the Kırk Yer by his wife and sons-in-law, who had accompanied the old prince on his travels through the lands. They gave Haji Musa's gift to his only son, Yakov, who took over the principality in his father's absence. Yakov, in turn, gave the cradle to his grandson, who was born during the pilgrimage of his grandfather Haji Musa. Since then, the cradle has been passed down from generation to generation as a family blessing of the first Karaite pilgrim. The descendants of Haji Moses have always been respected residents of the Kırk Yer. One of them, Isaac, received the title "Quencher of Thirst" for his wisdom. His son Ovadia was also awarded this title for his good deeds. Isaac's grandson Ilyagu, a descendant of Haji Musa, also became famous. At the head of the guard of the Kırk Yer, he fought bravely against the Genoese besieging the castle and died a hero on a Saturday afternoon in 1261 after driving the enemies back from the city walls. On his tombstone, the Karaites carved the inscription "He was a solid wall for his people both inside and outside the fortress". The Karaites remembered the name of Ilyagu, the prince of the Kırk Yer. They have many legends about this name. People still believe that Ilyagu received his extraordinary courage, wisdom, and strength from the cradle of Haji Musa, in which he grew up. On the night of the prince's death, the cradle was passed by divine forces to the next mountain and disappeared into the depths of the mountain. Since then, this two-humped mountain that protects the prince's cradle bears the name "Cradle Mountain". A Karaite legend says that "just as the Mount Olivet near Jerusalem will open and give the Ark of the Covenant hidden by the prophet Jeremiah, so the Cradle Mountain will open and the cradle of Haji Moses will rise from it and descend to the place where the voice of the newborn Savior of the World will be heard for the first time" (Polkanov 1995: 14–15; Zherdieva 2022: 20–22).

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