

Resemblances in the wedding and natal customs of Azerbaijanis and Bulgarians

Zlatozhivka Zdravkova, Reneta Zlateva

Angel Kanchev University of Ruse
Bulgaria

INTRODUCTION

Customs and rites are an integral part of human life. They reflect the strivings and the beliefs of several generations who, century by century, hand down their primordial traditions.

Among all of them, the merriest and most impatiently awaited ones are the rites and festivity connected with them with regard to an upcoming wedding between young people and the conception of the first child. These kinds of rites have been researched in different parts of the world but the present article will focus on their specificity in regions remote from each other by territory, but close in their perception of some ritual rites and holidays, such as Azerbaijan and Bulgaria.

Among the nations who inhabited the territory of present day Azerbaijan in the Early Middle Ages were the Bulgarians. This unquestionable fact is proved not only by existing historical resources but also by the toponyms, which are still common within the boundaries of the country (2:92; 3:166-169, 183-184; 7:152, 156, 170; 11: 133-135; 355-356; 12:33-36; 20:45-46; 27:13-15). A point of interest for science would be the common folk concepts and traditions of the two nations.

EXPOSITION

The Wedding For the youngsters, becoming linked is marked with a series of longings and hopes. The wedding is the merriment which every girl awaits since her childhood so as to see herself dressed up, and the boy – to have an heir soon.

To find out if young girls will find fiancés, several rituals are performed in Azerbaijan. For this purpose, on New Year's Eve, they take with themselves a

mirror or a key. Then they eavesdrop in front of one of the neighbors' houses. If they hear something that relates to their desire, it will come true or, in other words, they will marry. "За да избегнат незадомяване, младите не бива да сядат близо до края на масата в новогодишната нощ. Ако седнат на (ръба) ъгъла на масата, няма да се оженят в продължение на седем години". To avoid staying unmarried the youngsters should not sit near the end of the table on New Year's Eve. If they sit at the corner of the table, they will not marry over the next seven years (1:130-131). Even nowadays in the Bulgarian lands, youngsters avoid occupying such positions for the same reason and girls who are not engaged look to folk legends to find out about their future.

A significant part of the wedding tradition is the collection of information about the chosen girl, her family, etc. (1:131). This pre-wedding custom in Bulgaria is known as *sgleda*. Usually the participants are close relatives of the bachelor's family and have the task of choosing the most suitable girl (16:173). The Azerbaijani wedding is preceded by a small and a big engagement. A considerable part of the participants in the big engagement are women. The lads bring baskets with clothes, jewelry and sweets from their homes for the lasses. On their way to the lasses' houses, the lads are accompanied by female members of their families who sing songs. During the engagement ceremony the participants discuss questions connected with the wedding presents and fix the date of the wedding itself. (1:136). Small and big engagements were also performed in Bulgaria in the past (13:38-39; 16:174). The wedding clothes of the bride, according to the traditions of both nations, are given by the groom's family, and his clothes are given by the bride's family.

Along with the clothes for the girl, in Azerbaijan tradition has it that the matchmakers bring some gold jewelry, too – a ring, a bracelet, a necklace, earrings and sweets. The groom also brings the first fruits from the new crop from his home. Scarves, coal and onions are not given as presents because they symbolize separation, darkness and grief. From the moment of the engagement up to the wedding ceremony, friends and relatives of the girl gather in her home almost every night. It is usually respected women that prepare blankets, pillows and other covers for the future family. The songs and the merriment are part of the event. The singers are separated into two groups of 4-5 or more participants. Each group chooses a leader. Married women, who sing and dance Azerbaijani folk dances well, take part in the rite. The groups stand facing each other. The leader of one of the groups begins to dance while the other participants clap their hands. Then the roles shift. (1:137). The preparation of the dowry of the Bulgarian bride includes a lot of songs, dances and treats, too.

Preparations in the home of the girl are also related to the custom when a relative of the groom takes to the future bride fabrics, clothes, ornaments, dishes, etc. that have been bought for her. Among these objects there should be none that have already been used in order to avoid endless disagreements in the newlyweds' home. Sewing clothes for the bride is a job to be done by a woman of senior age with adult sons and daughters who are familiar with the mastery of tailoring. The seamstress sings while she is working (1:139). Usually weddings in Azerbaijan are held in the autumn, following the harvest, although to date this custom is not observed everywhere. The upcoming event is publicized by specially selected people. Two adult girls dressed in red, one of which is a relative of the bride and the other a close friend, go from house to house and invite people to the wedding, treating them to sweets. Those reply by saying "may they be blessed" or giving similar blessings (1:140). Here is a difference between the two countries – in Bulgaria the role of those two girls is performed by close friends of the groom who were bachelors, and also the guests are invited separately by the two families. (16:179).

Here comes the final part of the wedding rituals. According to Azerbaijani beliefs, from the early morning an appointed person, usually a woman, welcomes the guests. After the guests have drunk and eaten, the woman goes into the room where the bride is, greets her and gives her the presents. The way a woman is dressed, her hairstyle and the jewelry that she is wearing are indicative of her marital status. (1:141).

Similarities between the Bulgarian and Azerbaijani folklore can also be found in customs related to the separation of the bride and her mother and friends. In Bulgaria this is known as "feeding of the bride." In the evening before the wedding, the closest friends of the bride sleep at her place and in the morning they begin to prepare sweets so she does not starve.

An important role in Azerbaijani folklore is played by the brother of the bride, who also bids farewell to her. When leaving her father's house, the bride holds in her right hand a handful of rice, whose role is associated with the wish that unmarried women also find husbands. The rice is dropped one grain at a time. Upon leaving the home family members pour water behind the bride for her to be happy. Girls who are accompanying her stand on both sides and hold a mirror and a lit candle in their hands (1:144).

The custom known as "obstructing the way" is very interesting and it was more distinctive of Azerbaijan during the past, but even nowadays in Bulgaria close friends of the bride don't let the groom approach the bride until he gives them some money (1:145).

The bride is accompanied to the groom's house by musicians. This is a tradition which is known by both nations.

In Azerbaijan the bride is welcomed in her new home with songs. Her head is showered with coins and sweets so that her life is bright and sweet. A faience or glass vessel is put in front of the door, which the bride is supposed to break with her right foot. This custom is connected with the vow of faithfulness on behalf of the woman. The message is that if she doesn't remain faithful to her husband, she will be turned into pieces like the vessel itself (1:147).

A curtain is tailored between the covers in the room prepared for the Azerbaijan bride. The special bedding which is prepared for the young couple is called "taht" bed. It is prepared within the course of several days – three, even seven. Before that a baby is put on this bedding so that the bride can become a mother soon (1:149). In Bulgaria the mother of the bride prepares rugs, two coverlets, two mattresses and pillows filled with straw.

Once the bride and groom see each other they try to step on each other's toes so as to make it clear who will be the commander in the house, which is a belief typical of the folk conceptions of both nations.

Covering the bride's head with a veil and wearing it for three days after the wedding is a ritual which is no longer observed in Azerbaijan. Similar to the custom in Bulgaria, this ritual is called "veiling." Taking off the veil must be done by an adolescent who, with the help of a thin rolling pin or stick, takes off the veil from the bride's head and throws it on a fruit-bearing tree. After this moment the groom's parents give a precious gift to the bride. Only then can she show herself to her husband's relatives (1:149). In Bulgaria the veil, which is to be bought by the godmother or be borrowed, must also be taken off by the godmother. It is thrown once or three times on a fruit-bearing tree (15:102). Taking off the veil of the bride and throwing it on a fruit-bearing tree aims at pregnancy and fertility.

Several days later the bride's parents invite the young family and the groom's relatives to be their guests. Until this day the daughter is not allowed to visit her parents (1:149). In Bulgaria, the young family is not allowed to visit the house of the bride's parents until the 40th day after the wedding. This custom is called "povrytki" (returning) because this is the time when the bride returns to her parents (15:102).

Usually the Azerbaijan weddings are extremely hospitable and friendly and each one of their celebrations passes with feelings of merriment and affection. They treat their guests kindly, closely monitoring whether everyone has what they need.

The pregnancy and the childbirth Along with the numerous difficulties and obstacles, a child brings joy and hope for the continuation of the family and for the bringing of fame to it. Learning about the conception of a child in a family places the caring for and the preservation of the life of the mother and her child in a wider framework. This concern leaves the house to become collective and grows into a public one. Established unwritten rules and prohibitions are the most stringent guardians of the lives of the mother and child. They are directed toward guaranteeing normal pregnancy and preserving the health of both mother and child.

In most Bulgarian regions the pregnant woman is called “difficult”, “heavy”, “in a position” or “pregnant” (4:690; 5:181; 6:17; 9:471; 14:119; 16:164; 18:11; 19:169; 21:132; 22:146; 23:47). In Azerbaijan the pregnant woman is also called “pregnant”, “with two bodies”, “in a position”, “with a load” (1:99).

In some places in Bulgaria the pregnancy is kept secret even from the relatives, because it is believed that otherwise the woman will have a difficult birth (5:181; 9:471; 21:132; 23:48; 18:16-17). In Azerbaijan there is a similar belief that the pregnancy has to be kept secret for which the future mother swears an oath (1:99).

In Azerbaijan the young bride is given a child in her hands and the people make wishes that she become a mother soon. The inability of the woman to have a child causes contempt on behalf of the relatives (1:97). A childless woman in Bulgarian villages is named yalovitza (barren). For example, in the village of Belianovo, Ruse district, that kind of woman is called jalovshtina, ishtritza (barren animal) – words which highlight the negative attitude to the childless woman (21:132). In some villages there are woman herbalists who know different kinds of herbs that can assist conception.

The Azerbaijan people believe that if a childless woman drinks from the milk of a woman that has already given birth to a child, it will help her to get pregnant. For the same reason, a woman that has had a baby covers the head of the childless woman with a tablecloth. If she sees an egg in her dream, this is also taken as a sign that the childless woman will conceive a child. Conception can also happen if a woman who has had a child, and who has married on the same day as the childless couple, passes between the husband's trousers; if a childless woman keeps over smoke the collars of 40 shirts, then soaks them and has a bath in the same water; if a childless woman takes soil from seven mounds from the graveyard and without turning back takes it home, puts it into water and showers with it; if she quietly approaches a young mother; if the thumbs of the hands and the big toes of her feet are bound with white thread three times and the thread is finally cut with scissors, etc. Special vessels are used to pour water while the threads are kept over the childless woman's head. This ritual is performed three times while a magic

song is sung (1:98-99). A pregnant woman in Azerbaijan, as well as in Bulgaria, has to restrain from hard labor, from going out in the yard, or from going out after twilight.

Other prohibitions concerning pregnant women identified in the Azerbaijani folklore are as follows: it is forbidden to bring rabbits in the house for six months after child-birth because the newborn will have cleft lips; the pregnant woman must not look at fish or eat a fish meal, because the child will start speaking late or will remain dumb; if somebody steps across the pregnant woman while she is sleeping, the child will be lame; the child to be born will become similar in nature to the man in front of whom it starts kicking in its mother's womb; if a pregnant woman sees her reflection in the mirror, the child will be beautiful; if a pregnant woman eats a pomegranate, the child will be beautiful; if she eats a quince, its cheeks will be rosy; if she has camel meat, the newborn child will have full lips; if she eats watermelon, the child will grow apart from home and family (1:100).

All through Bulgaria folklore beliefs dictate that a pregnant woman has to be protected from fright and has to try every meal so as to avoid miscarriage. The future mother must not jump over a rope, cord, strap, chain or water; She must not kill a snake, sit on the threshold, cut her hair, kick a dog or cat, attend a slaughter, go to funerals, start a fire, wade in water, carry water from the well, collect sticks, mock invalids, eat certain foods, etc. (4:691; 5:181; 8:84; 9:558; 10:471; 14:113-114,119-120; 16:164; 18:12; 19:170; 21:132; 26:13-19).

The methods which are used to guess the gender of the child are very interesting. Two pillows are placed on both sides of the woman. Under one of them there is a knife, and under the other, scissors. The future mother is invited to sit on one of the pillows. If she sits on the knife, she will have a boy, but if she sits on the scissors, it will be a girl. There is an easier way which is used nowadays - if the bride's belly is protruding, it will be a boy, and if it is not, it will be a girl. It is mainly the form of the belly that is used to determine the gender of the child in many villages in Bulgaria (8:85; 9:560; 10:472; 16:164; 18:15; 19:170; 23:48; 26:24).

If, on the first day of her pregnancy, the woman looks at the moon, she will give birth to a son; if she sees the sun, it will be a daughter; if she sees an apple in a dream, it will be a daughter; if she sees a knife, it will be a son; if the expecting mother cries or yells often, she will deliver a baby girl; if the woman is quiet and calm, she will deliver a baby boy; if she sleeps longer and is more relaxed, it will be a son; if she sleeps little and is anxious, it will be a son; when a man, who has heard that a woman is pregnant, secretly watches her while she stands up from her seat and sees that she takes her first step with her left foot, it means that she will have a daughter; if she steps with the right foot, she will have a son; if the mother's

milk appears first in the right breast, she will have a son; if it is in the left breast, she will have a girl; if the child moves in the front side of the belly, it is indicative of a boy; if the child makes its first moves in the back side, it shows that it will be a girl; if the woman's belly is baggy or flat-shaped, she will have a girl; if it is sharp and protruding, she will have a boy; if there is meat around the oral bone of a boiled sheep's head and the expecting mother guesses this, she will give birth to a girl; if she doesn't, it will be a boy; another belief has it that if salt is secretly spilled on the head of the pregnant woman, and she reaches for her head first, it will be a son; if she touches her leg, it will be a daughter; if the lips of the pregnant woman become fuller, this indicates the birth of a daughter; if there is no change, it indicates the birth of a son.

Predictions can also be made based on a child's behavior. When one of the child's front teeth falls out, the family makes a millet porridge. A knife and a comb are put on the table. If the child reaches for the knife, the next child in the family will be male; if the child reaches for the comb, it will be female; if the pregnant woman becomes more beautiful, it means she will have a son, if she becomes ugly, she will give birth to a daughter (1:101-102). Almost the same beliefs are present in the Bulgarian folklore conceptions, too.

If the forehead of the newborn child has hair on it, it will be cruel; if the newborn has a big head, it will be clever; if it has yellow eyes, it will be crafty; if there is a birth mark on its belly button, it will become a great man; if the baby is delivered on an odd day of the week, then the next child will be male; if during the birth the child reaches for its ears, it will become a famous person, but if it leaves its hands on its chest, it will grow up a clever person; if the hands of the baby are moving as if the child is seeking something, it will be bad-tempered (1:104-105). It must be noted that Bulgarians have similar beliefs.

After the cutting of the umbilical cord the child is given a bath. In order to prevent the sweating of the child, salt is added into the water. It is interesting to comment on the Azerbaijani view that salt is put to make sure that the child becomes good-tempered and honest and so that it keeps its word and is not cowardly. If the child acquires those kinds of negative features, they used to say that this child is "duzsuz", literally meaning born "without salt" (1:105). Unlike Azerbaijan, where the presence of the salt could determine the nature of the individual's character, in Bulgaria it is rather connected with the physiological changes in the child's organism.

It is believed in Azerbaijan that the mother shouldn't come near the child while it is given a bath. This belief reflects the idea about respecting and worshipping one's parents (1:105-106). According to the Bulgarian traditions, the first person to give

the baby a bath is the “grandmother” (the village midwife) and after that, the mother-in-law. This practice exists in almost every Bulgarian region (8:86; 18:20; 24:215; 26:33).

The customs and rites connected with bearing and raising a child have apotropaic (protective) and isolating character. Their main purpose is the protection of the pregnant woman and the child. The resources used to chase away evil forces are diverse in different ethnographic regions of Bulgaria. The mother-in-law puts a red tassel and silver coins next to the mother’s head and the same things are put on the child’s cradle against “evil eyes.”

The 40-day period after the birth is dangerous for the mother and her child, because then they are most vulnerable to the influence of evil forces. According to Azerbaijani beliefs, over the next 40 days after the birth, the room where the mother and child sleep should have a constantly burning lamp or candles. A needle is attached to the collar of the expecting mother; a mirror, knife, dagger or other metal object is placed under the pillow. A glass container with onion in it is put before the front door, and also an open pair of scissors. The dualistic view of the existence of two terms - good and evil, light and dark - is also reflected here. Scissors reflect the glare, the light, and accordingly have apotropaic function. The onion which is not sweet but has bitter taste performs the same role. Azerbaijanis consider that, as a product of the evil forces, onion prevents them from returning to the house. Therefore, an onion is placed together with a pair of scissors. If the evil spirit dares to come out of the vessel, it will be cut into pieces by the scissors (1:106).

The isolation of the mother during the first forty days after birth is determined by the perception that she is unclean. (This is fixed in the Old Testament!) During this period she is most vulnerable to the influence of evil forces. The isolating procedures have partitioning functions, a kind of barrier between the outside world on the one hand, and the mother and child on the other. To keep the forces of evil away from the child, his diapers are not to be hung out until the 40th day (4:702; 8:87; 16:166; 18:30; 19:172; 23:47).

According to Bulgarian beliefs, if the woman goes outside, she must leave some wormwood near the baby's head to protect it from evil forces, although the mother-in-law in most cases remains with the child. Up to the 40th day, the mother should not go to weddings, so as not to hear the music, and she should not go out either (8:89; 9:560; 10:473; 18:30; 22:155; 23:47-48; 25:63).

In Azerbaijan people's beliefs have it that a fate (evil fairy) has a role in the life of the child. She protects the child from evil forces by giving it health and happiness.

Абдулла, Б. Азербайджанский обрядовый фольклор и его поэтика. Баку, 1990, с. 112. Bulgarian national legends state that on the third day after childbirth three fairies come and foretell the future of the baby (4:701; 5:184; 9:562; 10:474; 14:106; 18:22; 19:174; 24:216; 25:63; 26:35).

During the 40-day period after the birth people try not to leave the mother alone. Cats are not allowed into the room where the woman lies. If the child remains alone, according to Azerbaijani belief, a veil with a raw egg in it is suspended in the room (1:118-121). Bulgarian folk tales comprise similar beliefs concerning the role of the veil (17:124).

After the 40-day period is over, the number of birth customs and rites associated with the mother and her child decreases. From there onwards, only the most significant moments from the child's life are recorded. According to Azerbaijani beliefs, if the child is whining, it is given a bath at a crossroads (1:122).

The belief that water has purifying power is completely identical in Azerbaijan and Bulgaria. Bulgarian folk legends state that giving "cheirsko" hay, which contains many herbs (it is called this because it grows on the banks of the river Rusenski Lom) and saying magic words over the water will make the child calmer (17:126).

According to Azerbaijani protective beliefs, a bead with a little eye is sewn on the infant's hat. If the child falls ill, to know whether it is from the evil eye or illness, people carry out the following procedure: they put spring water in a container and then put a piece of charcoal in it. If it sinks in the water, the child was affected by the evil eye. If it was so, the child is given a bath to wash away the danger. The cradle, even if the child is not in it, should not be taken out, because otherwise the child will have a headache or earache. When the child sleeps, it should not be kissed, because it may die. This belief is related to the fact that while sleeping the spirit of man is separated from him. A kiss would leave a stain on the body and then, when the spirit returns, it may not recognize its master. If the child is held in somebody's hands at midnight, it must be lifted over the head of the man who is holding it, otherwise it will often be ill or it will not grow up. If the child is taken outside after dark, it must be accompanied by sugar, charcoal, etc. (1:122). In Bulgaria, burning incense and other herbs are used for the child's protection as well as smells and the color red (4:688-713; 9:470-475; 16:163-171).

After the 40-day period the child is given a bath together with the mother. On the 41st day, early in the morning while it is still dawn, 40 handfuls of water brought from a spring or river are poured in a vessel, which is then poured on the head of the mother and child, and the objective is to demonstrate the release of the 40 dirty

days. This custom, which is characteristic of Azerbaijanis, is accompanied by the singing of songs (1:123).

In the Bulgarian ritual beliefs the christening of the child is one of the most important moments after the 40 "dirty" days have passed, and one of the brightest days for each person. This is the first day when mother and child go out together. In the church the priest reads a prayer and the mother bows 40 times before several icons. Similarity with the ethnic Azerbaijani beliefs is in the number 40. Due to various religious dogmas that the two nations (Azerbaijan and Bulgaria) observe, the rituals differ.

Similar rituals associated with the cutting of the hair of the child are observed in Azerbaijan. It is considered that by cutting the hair the spirit causing disease to the child will be appeased. The removing of the hair is believed to remove the spirit from it. In order to avoid displeasing the spirit, the hair is preserved (1:15-16).

CONCLUSION

From the review of natal and wedding rites and customs of the Azerbaijani and Bulgarian nations we can draw the following conclusions:

- Conservatism and striving for a brighter and better future are characteristics of the mentality of both nations. The traditions and beliefs of Azerbaijanis and Bulgarians show a remarkable desire to ensure the welfare of children and home leading to the establishment of a clean and holy family nest;
- The adoption of Christianity by the Bulgarians has not thrown a shadow over the old traditions which are still an existing part of the life and ritual cycles of the people. On the other hand, the Muslim religion has not erased the Zoroastrian convictions whose traces still remain bright for the Azerbaijani people;
- The apotropaic and cathartic rituals are perceived identically by both nations;
- The dual nature of the world associated with the so-called twin myths is an idea that is perceived by many nations around the world. Belief in Good and Evil, in darkness and light, and in the masculine and feminine is reflected in the lifestyle, beliefs and traditions of both Azerbaijanis and Bulgarians.

REFERENCES AND NOTES:

1. Абдулла, Б. Азербайджанский обрядовый фольклор и его поэтика. Баку, 1990.
2. Азербайчан топонимлари. Енсиклопедик луѓэт. Баку, 1999.
3. Алиярлы, С. История Азербайджана. С древнейших времен до 70-х гг. XIX в. Баку, 2009.
4. Арнаудов, М. Очерци по българския фолклор. т. II. София, 1969.
5. Бакалов, К. Обретеник (етнографски очерк). ДА – Русе, 1992.
6. Батишница. Русе. 1989.
7. Бунятов, З. Азербайджан в VII-IX вв. Баку, 1965.
8. Бъзовец (селищно проучване). Русе, 2004.
9. Вакарелски, Хр. Етнография на България. София, 1974.
10. Вакарелски, Хр. Етнография на България. София, 1977.
11. Гейбуллаев, Г. К этногенезу азербайджанцев (историко этнографическое исследование). Баку, 1991.
12. Гейбуллаев, Г. Топонимия Азербайджана. Баку, 1986.
13. Генчев, Ст. Сватбата. София, 1987.
14. Генчев, Ст., Г. Вълчинова и кол. Етнографски проблеми на народната духовна култура. Т. II. София, 1994.
15. Георгиев, К. Чилнов – село край реката. Русе, 1996.
16. Етнография на България. Т. III. София, 1985.
17. Йорданова, Л. От раждането до годеча. София, 2004.
18. Златева, Р. Обичаи и обреди при бременност и раждане в село Широково. – Алманах за историята на Русе. Т. VIII. Русе, 2008.
19. Капанци (етнографски проучвания на Североизточна България). София, 1985.
20. Касумова, Ю. Азербайджан в III-VII вв. Баку, 1993.
21. Ненов, Н. Летописът на свещеник Кирил и фолклорът на село Беляново. София, 2006.
22. Ненов, Н. Русе – портрет на века. София, 2000.
23. Ненов, Н. Табачка. Теренни материали и проучвания. Русе, 2004.
24. Огнянова, Е. Традиции и празници в България. София, 2003.
25. Славейков, Р. Български народни обичаи и вярвания. Велико Търново, 2005.
26. Ставрева, Л. Български обичаи и ритуали. София, 2005.
27. Юнусов, А. Месхетинские турки: дважды депортированный народ. Баку, 2000.

Summary

Resemblances in the wedding and natal customs of Azerbaijanis and Bulgarians

Zlatozhivka Zdravkova, Reneta Zlateva
Angel Kanchev University of Ruse, Bulgaria

The present article describes the natal rites and customs of the Azerbaijan and Bulgarian nations. Special attention is paid to the resemblances in the practicing and understanding of the traditions. Despite the fact that the two nations live in regions remote from each other, they have common beliefs and strive to provide prosperity for the home, family and children.

Key words: *wedding customs, natal customs, Azerbaijanis, Bulgarians, resemblances*