

BABY'S BED – CRADLE

(Based on Ethnographic Materials from Abkhazia)

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Abstract: According to individually collected ethnographic materials from Abkhazia, noteworthy data have been recorded reflecting traditional customs related to the baby's bed – the cradle – and its associated practices, which remain significant in contemporary life. In recent years, attitudes towards child-rearing among the population of the studied region have been undergoing notable changes. The family and representatives of the older generation continue to play a key role in shaping a distinct Georgian national worldview. The paper discusses certain aspects of national consciousness in Abkhazia. It is true that today, this region, once rich in history, has been lost, yet the Georgian spirit and genetic heritage have not been eradicated. Echoes of Georgian customs and traditions still resonate in the consciousness of its inhabitants, and their memory preserves numerous historical realities. What is traditional and historical holds deep meaning for them. The cradle remains in their historical memory – it is cherished and treated with reverence. Although cradles are preserved in many households, their daily use is gradually disappearing, which has become a source of regret for the elders.

Keywords: Baby bed, cradle, Abkhazia.

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Introduction to the article. The cradle is one of the most important and interesting monuments of Georgian ethnocultural heritage. The cradle has a long tradition in Georgia, as evidenced by the knowledge of selecting and processing the material for the cradle. The decoration and symbolism of the ornamentation are also important. Different types of wood were used as the material for the cradle, which depended on the type of trees that grew in a particular region. The traditions associated with this branch of craftsmanship have almost disappeared. It underwent several transformations over the era and has survived in ethnographic life to this day.

In the field of research related to the cradle, the work of Vera Bardavelidze-Lomia is noteworthy, who laid the foundation for the study of the cradle – the cradle – and the customs associated with it in the Georgian scientific space. The works of N. Kapanadze on the Georgian cradle are also important and valuable. Nevertheless, the cradle has not been the object of special study by researchers, so the paucity of literature on this issue should be explained by this.

Of interest in this regard are the cradles that have survived in modern Abkhazia and the professional knowledge related to raising infants, which was passed down from generation to generation.

Discussion. The cradle-arkvan, ontse (in Mingrelian) – is defined in the ethnographic lexicon of Georgian material culture as a baby's bed, and the same term is attested among the Georgian population of Abkhazia. The Abkhazians refer to the cradle as agara (Bigvava, 1983, გვ. 81-86); (Inal-Ipa, 2016, p. 259); (Machavariani, 2010, p. 179); (Bakhia-Okrushvili, 2020, p. 47). In the 1892 publication „Abkhaz Alphabet“ (Абхазская азбука), the cradle is referred to in Abkhaz as agara, accompanied by an illustration of a cradle that is identical to the Georgian one (Abkhazskaia azbuka, 1892, p. 3). In 2023, a museum was opened in Abkhazia, specifically in Gudauta, and an exhibition was organized to mark the 30th anniversary of the Victory and Independence. The exhibition featured „Cradles of Heroes,“ draped with Abkhazia's flag. The cradles presented in the museum are identical to the traditional Georgian

cradle (<https://sputnik-abkhazia.ru/20230920/kolybel-geroya-vystavka-k-yubileyu-pobedy-otkrylas-v-sukhume-1048087848.html>, n. d.)

Before being placed in a cradle, infants were laid in „Khochichi“. Khochichi is a baby's bed – a smaller, simpler version of the cradle (Orbeliani, 1993, p. 428). This pre-cradle type of bed is known by different names across various regions of Georgia (Kapanadze, 1994, p. 44). In Samegrelo, it was called „Tepia“ (Makalatia, 1941, p. 272). However, in some regions, people were unfamiliar with the use of the Khochichi, and the word itself was unknown to them (Bardavelidze-Lomia, 1953, p. 239). Khochichi represents the most ancient and basic form of an infant's bed, which eventually evolved into the cradle as we know it today (Varshalomidze, 1987, pp. 82-83). An infant was placed in the cradle only after three days or sometimes a few weeks following birth. Before that, the baby was laid on a Tepia by the midwife and was firmly wrapped with „Artakhebi“ (swaddling cloths). According to narrators, placing the baby on a Tepia was rooted in the folk belief that nothing should be purchased in advance for a child before their birth – a practice referred to as „waiting for the name“. The Tepia was usually made hastily on the day of the child's birth and was used mainly for the ease of wrapping the baby. Additionally, during the first days after childbirth, it was difficult for the mother to get up from bed and care for or massage, breastfeed the baby placed in the cradle, which further justified the initial use of the Tepia. The tepia was a thick wooden board, sized to fit a newborn. Khochichi was primarily used before placing the infant into a cradle. The midwife (khemetkhum) would swaddle the baby and lie beside the mother. A few days later, the baby would be hexed with the ritual of „galenish“ – the „gareta“. The midwife was customarily rewarded with a gift of soap, a gesture known as „khes nobonueri“ – a „hand offering“ (Author's Field Ethnographic Diary, 2024). The institution of the midwife is known in almost all regions of Georgia, except for some highland areas. For a certain period, the midwife played a central role in caring for the woman in labor and the newborn, and therefore, the family was obliged to send her off with appropriate honor. The manner of this farewell depended on the family's means. In Abkhazia, it was recorded that the midwife had to be given soap as a gift (Author's Field Ethnographic Diary, 2024). In various regions of Georgia, it was considered necessary to offer soap and bread (Gvatua, 1997, p. 71)

In Abkhazia, walnut wood was considered the best material for making cradles (Akaba, 1960, p. 160). However, cradles were also made from other lightweight woods such as elm, linden, pine, hazel, beech, oak, and others. In many cases, people no longer paid close attention to the type of wood used and simply chose whatever was available. Lightweight wood was preferred because every part of the cradle had to be carved and ornamented, and such wood was easier to work with. It was also customary to cut the wood for the cradle during a full moon. The best wood for making the shibaki (tube) or kalami (reed) was fig, birch, and poplar, as these types of wood are soft and easy to drill. There were two types of kalami, depending on the baby's gender (Kapanadze, 1994, p. 46). The cradle-maker would turn the cradle three times to the right and bless it. The owner would never take the cradle on a Monday. According to narrators, the shibaki was traditionally given as a gift along with the cradle (Author's Field Ethnographic Diary, 2024).

The cradle was held in great respect and was treated with love and reverence. In folk belief, the cradle was seen as a spiritual entity, and people would address it as if it were a living being. When speaking about the cradle, they would refer to it in spiritual terms – for example, they would say „arkvanish meyunafa,“ meaning „bringing the cradle.“ A few days after birth, the girl's parents would bring a fully decorated cradle along with gifts (Inal-Ipa, 2016, p. 259). It was customary for the woman's family to provide the cradle for the first child, while for the second child, it was the man's family who was responsible for furnishing it anew. If a cradle was borrowed, it had to be returned with a gift as a sign of respect.

The cradle was made of simple sideboards attached to paired vertical posts at the head and foot. An arch was placed at the top of these posts, while rocking supports (sagogavebi) were attached at the bottom. Above the rocking supports were crossbars (khidabi), into which beams (kochabi) were inserted. The sideboards were held together by rods passed through holes in them. Among the various cradle designs

found in Georgia, three main types can be distinguished based on their rocking mechanism: without rocking supports (usamogvo), without supports but with a curved bottom (usamogvo momrvalebul-dziri), and with rocking supports (sagogmano). The Georgian cradle equipped with sagogavi (rocking supports) was widely used throughout Georgia and represented the more developed form of a baby's bed. An essential component of the cradle is the artakhi – a flat, firm cloth used for wrapping the baby in the cradle. Other necessary elements include: sabetchurebi (shoulder straps), a knee pillow (mukhtbalishe), a mattress with a hygienic hole, and a wooden urine-drainage tube (shibaki) placed inside the cradle. The shibaki was shaped differently based on the child's gender: for girls, the mouth of the tube was carved in an elongated oval form, while for boys it was round. The top of the shibaki was coated with wax and wrapped in a piece of muslin cloth. The use of shibaki was common in various regions of Georgia, exception of Mtuleti (Makalatia, 1930, p. 117). The shibaki, which Georgians living in Abkhazia referred to as kalami, was traditionally made from bamboo, as confirmed by ethnographic materials. However, written sources indicate that shibaki was also made from reed wood. In Abkhazia, Georgians called it kalami, while Abkhazians called it a-kalami (Dbar, 2000, pp. 59-60). In Samegrelo, instead of using a shibaki, they used a piece of reed, which was inserted into a hygienic hole specifically cut into the mattress (Kapanadze, 1994, p. 50).

After crafting the individual parts of the cradle, the artisan would begin the process known as „building the cradle.“ Traditionally, the cradle's mattress was filled with special dry grass. Sometimes, wool-filled mattresses were also used. However, grass-filled mattresses were considered healthier – they prevented the baby from overheating, allowed moisture to pass through easily, and provided greater comfort for the infant. Placing the baby on the khochichi (early bed) – known as dakvra (laying down) – and raising a child in a cradle were both believed to ensure the proper development of the spine and a well-formed back (Mindadze, 2005, p. 7).

After the cradle was specially prepared, a ritual of placing the baby into it for the first time was held. This ceremony was typically performed by the midwife or the elder woman of the household. During this first placement into the cradle, the infant would be blessed. A similar blessing was also given the first time the cradle was brought outside the home. The baby was always placed into the cradle during a full moon, as this was believed to bring happiness and good fortune in life. The day of the ritual also had to be carefully chosen. Tuesdays, Thursdays, and Saturdays were considered auspicious days. However, according to some respondents, there was hesitation about bringing the cradle on a Saturday, as it was traditionally regarded as a day associated with the deceased. Families often used Saturdays to prepare offerings – tabaki – for the souls of the deceased (Author's Field Ethnographic Diary, 2024). Various customs were performed during the ritual of placing the baby in the cradle for the first time. It was believed that a sleeping baby in the cradle should not be moved to another place to sleep, as it might cause the child to lose their ability to sleep well. For this reason, families always tried to keep the cradle close to the mother's bedroom.

The baby was placed in the cradle in a well-positioned, proper posture, with the arms and legs gently secured. The cloths laid over the mattress were tied around the baby's limbs, and the artakhebi (binding straps) were fastened – one across the chest and the other near the legs. A knee pillow was customarily placed to protect the baby's knee joints and to allow the legs to remain free and comfortable. The wraps and artakhebi were tied around both the baby and the cradle twice, with the ends knotted securely. The part of the cradle where the baby's head and neck would rest was slightly hollowed out to ensure proper support and alignment for the head and neck.

In Abkhazia, as in Samegrelo, there existed a superstition that a baby should not be taken outside. If it was necessary to do so, a cross would be drawn on the baby's forehead using ashes. To protect the child from the evil eye, according to folk customs, amulets and charms were hung on the cradle. The infant's clothing was never left outside overnight during the first year. To ward off evil spirits believed to target babies, people would place protective items such as scissors, a knife, or a piece of iron under the baby's head in the cradle. It was believed that these objects would drive away harmful forces. The

cradle was often adorned with various types of amulets for this purpose (Kapanadze, 1994, p. 51). A child typically remained in the cradle for three to four years.

Great attention was given to the proper nourishment of the child. The baby's main source of food was the mother's milk, which the infant was expected to consume for at least one year. Mothers would breastfeed their babies immediately after birth. In the first few days, before the mother's milk came in, the infant would be fed with diluted liquids (khseni). Breastfeeding with the mother's milk was considered essential for raising a healthy child. Supplementary food was introduced around the age of 4 to 5 months. Babies were gradually given a taste of nearly all types of locally available foods. (Mindadze, 2005, p. 8).

According to respondents, in the past, magical practices were also used to protect the newborn and the mother. It was believed that evil spirits especially targeted infants and women who had just given birth. These spirits were considered particularly dangerous at night, after sunset – the time associated with heightened activity of malevolent forces. For this reason, people tried to ensure the baby remained indoors after sunset and that none of the infant's clothing or belongings were left outside. On the night of Chiakokona (a traditional fire-jumping ritual), families were especially careful not to leave anything outdoors, most of all, anything belonging to a newborn. Even today, it is customary not to leave a baby's clothes outside overnight for the first year (Author's Field Ethnographic Diary, 2024). Various types of amulets were also hung on the baby's cradle, especially pieces of iron or iron-crafted figures, which were made silently by blacksmiths in a ritualistic manner. These cradle-bound amulets served different protective purposes – for example, to guard against the evil eye, sleep disturbances, or irritability. It was also common practice to place blessed charcoal, an iron knife with a black handle, a small dagger, or scissors under the baby's head. Some amulets were sewn directly onto the child's clothing. Despite the use of many amulets to protect the child from evil spirits, if the baby still fell ill, families would turn to a prayer woman (mlotsavi), who was typically an elderly woman. A common ritual included a prayer to ward off the evil eye. This is an incantation used against the evil eye. In cases of the „evil eye“ – „tolish“ – a blessing would be performed over the infant, and the written prayer or medicinal charm would be wrapped in cloth and either hung on the cradle or placed beneath the mattress. Various amulets could also be hung on the cradle or worn around the child's neck. The protection of infants from evil spirits is documented across different regions of Georgia as well (Kakabadze, 1914, pp. 18-19; Mamaladze, 1893, p. 92; Mashurko, 1894, p. 306; Stepanov, 1894, p. 81). The majority of these blessings and objects hung on the baby or the cradle were intended to frighten away or banish harmful spirits. Although cradles are no longer commonly used in modern times, people still often place certain protective items beneath the head area of a baby's bed to ward off evil spirits. It was also believed that there were lucky and unlucky cradles. Unlucky cradles were either placed under a tree or left by a church fence, while lucky cradles were passed on or lent out to other families (Machavariani, 1957, p. 275). It was strictly forbidden to rock an empty cradle, as, according to folk belief, this could lead to a child's illness or even death.

Until recent times in Georgia, the tradition of offering a cradle to a major shrine (salotsavi) was preserved. In cases of infertility or a child's illness, a small cradle would be offered to a sacred icon. These votive cradles were typically made from fertility-associated trees, such as pear or walnut. Before being presented to the icon, the cradle would first be hung from a sacred tree and gently rocked, symbolically invoking blessings. It was also known to offer miniature cradles made of silver. Such ceremonies have been documented in other regions as well (Kozlov, 1964, p. 129). Crafting a cradle from a sacred tree, hanging it on that very tree, and rocking it was considered a magical act based on the principle that „like produces like“ (Bedukidze, 1973, p. 124). Lending out a lucky cradle was also customary, but only within the same family or lineage. Taking the cradle outside the clan was forbidden, as it was believed that doing so could transfer the family's fortune and destiny to another lineage.

Conclusion. For many years, the Georgians living in modern-day Abkhazia have been victims of aggression and displacement by both separatist forces and the Russian side. The local population

faces material and social hardship. Nevertheless, despite these challenges, elements of traditional life – including the cradle and the customs associated with it – have been preserved, albeit in altered forms. The use of the baby's bed – the cradle – is still observed in this region. However, it is important to note that these cradles are old, as there are no longer any cradle-makers in the area. Families now use inherited cradles – so-called „lucky cradles“ – that have been passed down within kinship groups or preserved within the village. Since the late 20th century, ready-made European-style baby beds have begun to spread actively, with urban residents being their first users. However, today these beds have also reached rural areas and have become accessible to nearly all segments of the population. The tradition and phrase „arkvanish meuafa“ – meaning „bringing the cradle“ – is still in use in modern life. However, nowadays, the bride's family brings a ready-made baby bed instead of a traditional cradle. A significant portion of the Georgian population in Abkhazia has preserved the cradle as an element of their ethnic culture to this day. This preservation has been made possible largely due to the enduring strength of historical memory.

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