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The Stone Baby : A Turkish Lullaby

by

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IN every part of the world infertility is seen as one of the greatest misfortunes that can befall a young married woman, leading frequently to divorce, isolation, and poverty. In the Turkish world, in particular, an infertile wife may be obliged to repay her dowry, return home, and live as a dependent on her family for the rest of her life. The legend of the *taşbebek* (stone baby), which survives in lullabies sung in all parts of Anatolia, especially the Kastamonu district, tells the story of one such young woman, whose husband is about to leave her on account of her childlessness. At this point a holy man appears. Handing the woman a stone carved in the image of a baby, he tells her to wrap it in swaddling clothes, place it in a cradle, and pray to Allah. This she does, and the next morning discovers that the stone baby has been transformed into a real one. On hearing the baby cry, her husband returns and the couple are reconciled.

The lullaby here translated is a slightly shortened version of one originally published by Nasih Güngör in *Kastamonu Ninniler* [Kastamonu lullabies] (1945, 17–23). The young woman here prays to Allah, Tanra (a name sometimes used in Turkey for Allah, but originally a Central Asian sky deity), and Huda (a Persian name for God), as well as to the prophet Muhammad and a variety of holy men. The latter include Mevlana (the founder of the Mevlevi order of dervishes), Hadji Bektash (the founder of the Bektashiya order of dervishes), Eyûp Sultan, and the Caliph Ömer. The number and variety of the saints appealed to indicates the wide-ranging provenance of the stone-baby legend, which may have originally derived from one of the pre-Islamic stone cults of Central Asia.

In the original Turkish version of the lullaby, each verse is divided into four lines, the first three of which contain an internal rhyme. All four lines end with a so-called *redif* or pillion word, here *ninni*, not normally counted as a rhyme. Moreover, the last line of each verse, generally an incantation to God, a saint, or a holy man, is rhymed, in this case almost

invariably with *versin* or *etsin*. Thus

Aktaş diye belediğim ninni
 Seni Hak'dan dilediğim ninni
 Al bağırdak doladığım ninni
 Mevlâm sana bir can versin ninni!

Açtım sandığımı açtım ninni
 Bindallıdan yorgan biçtim ninni
 Babandan ümîdim kestim ninni
 Huda sana bir can versin ninni!

In the Kastamonu version of the stone-baby legend, as recorded by Nasih Güngör, the young woman's name is Meryem, and the young man's is Ahmed. When Meryem falls in love with Ahmed, Ahmed's father, a village elder, quickly arranges their marriage, and the wedding is celebrated with candles, drums, and wrestling matches. When, however, the young couple fails to produce a child, Ahmed's father — afraid that he may never become a grandfather — tries to persuade his son to remarry. This Ahmed agrees to do, and preparations are made for the wedding. On the night before the wedding Meryem runs out of the house crying. To her surprise she discovers a holy man with a white beard standing in front of the threshing place and praying to Allah. He asks her why she is crying, and, when she explains, he takes from his shoulder bag a stone image of a baby. "Take this stone," he says. "Swaddle it like a living baby and sing a lullaby to it. Allah, who is all-powerful, will grant what you desire." With that, he disappears. Obeying his command, Meryem returns to the house, prepares the cradle, and lays the swaddled stone in it. She then sings the following lullaby.

THE STONE BABY

Stone baby, I have swaddled you,
 With cradle straps supported you,
 By day and night protected you.
 Mevlâm, send you a soul!

My coffers I've unlocked for you,
 A velvet blanket sewn for you,
 Your father's love foregone for you.
 Huda, send you a soul!

Your father's gone a-wandering,
 His hard-won fortune squandering,
 Leaving your mother pondering.
 Tanri, send you a soul!

Meryem Hatun's your mother's name.
 How long must she play out this game?
 When will it end, this bitter shame?
 Allah, send you a soul!

A grocer will sell grapes, they say.
 In tears of blood I weep all day;
 Yet for your tears I daily pray.
 Mevlâm, send you a soul!

Deprived of rest, deprived of sleep,
 The livelong night I lie and weep,
 Waiting to see my baby peep.
 Mevlâm, send you a soul!

And while I watch, by day and night,
 Your thankless father, taking flight,
 Seeks out new sources of delight.
 Allah, send you a soul!

My neighbors enter by the door,
 Seeking to know what I desire.
 What can it be, they oft enquire?
 Allah, send you a soul!

By day and night, in my distress,
 I pray that God will one day bless
 My little one with happiness.
 Mevlâm, send you a soul!

Across the Black Sea, storm clouds run . . .
 When shall I see my little one?
 In Istanbul, Eyüp Sultan,
 May he too favor you.

The Pleiades, in the night sky,

That make the boats in June to fly . . .
When shall I hear my baby cry?
Mevlâm, send you a soul!

Your father's name, Molla Ahmed,
God's blessing be upon his head.
Then there's the prophet Muhammed,
May he too favor you.

Damascus silver in your hair,
Your skin as running water clear . . .
Exalted be the Lord Ömer,
May he too favor you.

The cradle rocks, no sound I hear.
When will my little lamb appear?
Hadji Bektaş, in Kırşehir,
May he too favor you.

A stranger passing by one day,
From whence, alas, I cannot say,
Advised that I for you should pray.
May he too favor you.

From heaven, they say, God's mercy rains,
Bringing relief to all our pains,
'Tis he alone our fate ordains.
Mevlâm, send you a soul!