

Black Cats, Bleak Mondays and Broken Mirrors



by Gulnar
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How many times have we heard that if a black cat walks out in front of us, we'll have bad luck? Of course, we know that any such misfortune has nothing to do with the poor cat. But still so many of us go out of our way and even change direction to avoid such an encounter. There's even a Russian song that reminds us that it's really the poor black cats that get all the bad luck: people are always shooing them out from their pathways. This belief isn't confined just to Azerbaijan, people in many other countries believe it as well.

Like all nations, Azerbaijanis have their own beliefs and superstitions. With the passage of time, some of these ideas get forgotten while others are passed down from generation to generation. These ideas are instilled within us from childhood. We hear them from our grandparents, parents, especially our mothers and grandmothers. And it seems that no matter how educated we are, we follow many of them. They influence our behavior.

Of course, we understand that there is so little basis for these beliefs, but still we are subconsciously influenced by them. In turn, we pass these ideas along to the younger generation. Some people are more superstitious than others, but there's probably not a single person in Azerbaijan who doesn't follow at least one superstition. So, I decided to do a little research to identify some of the most widespread and common superstitions and beliefs that are circulating in Baku these days.

The one who trims his nails at night, cuts down his life.
Meaning: Don't trim your fingernails / toenails at night or you'll shorten your life.
Gecə çımaq tutan, ömründən kəsir.

This is one of the most widespread beliefs in Azerbaijan. It seems everybody knows it and, indeed, as illogical as it may sound, many people follow it. I heard it first from my grandmother and I still follow this advice.

If your ear is red and burning, it means somebody is talking about you.
Qulağın od tutub yarınsa kimsə sənin haqqında danışır.

If your ear buzzes, somebody is talking about you somewhere.
Qulağın cingildəyirsə, sözünü danışılar.

Some people even differentiate between the ears. The left ear, they say, means someone is saying something bad about you; the right one, something good.

If your right palm is itching, you'll get money.
Sağ əlin qaşınarsa, pul gələr.

But luck requires some action. To make it come true: kiss your right palm and press it against your right eye. But if it's your left palm itching, you'll experience a substantial loss of money. To prevent this, kiss the back of your left hand and press it against your left eye.

Another interesting thing about these superstitions is that even though people don't necessarily believe them, they still often repeat and follow them. When my hand itches, I don't really think I'll get any money just by scratching my palm, but still when someone tells me that their palm is itching, it's amazing how often I find myself telling them what to do make it work to their advantage. Therefore, it's often hard to pinpoint exactly where we have learned these beliefs. It seems we're surrounded by them and hear

them from everybody, everywhere. It's like we've been brought up on them. Perhaps, we believe them because we hear so many of them in childhood, and they are tucked away in the deepest corner of our hearts. Otherwise, how can we explain the fact that these illogical beliefs don't die out and are passed down generation after generation?

You shouldn't sweep the house in the evening, the abundance of the home might go away.

Axşam ev süpürməzlər ki, evin ruzisi gedər.

Provision is made in case you really do need to sweep the floor at night. You can still avert any problems if you simply don't discard what you have swept up until the morning. Actually, we don't follow this saying in our home. If the floor needs to be swept, we sweep it, no matter what time of day or night. But there are people who follow this belief very strictly and wouldn't dream of sweeping the floor in the evening. Other expressions caution about doing other activities at night.

You shouldn't give salt/money to somebody else from your home in the evening. The abundance of the home will go/run away.

Axşam evdən duz/pul verməzlər. Evin bəxəti qaçar.

Here's another belief that let's you offset any negative consequences.

If somebody steps on your foot, step on his foot in return; otherwise, someone close to you will die.

Biri digərinin ayağını tapdalayanda ayağı tapdalanan da tapdalayanın ayağını tapdalanmalıdır, yoxsa əzizi ölər.

It seems this belief is quite widespread. For sure, when someone accidentally steps on your foot in Azerbaijan, you won't step on his foot in revenge. Instead, you touch or take hold of the offending person's hand. This may seem weird to a foreigner who doesn't know about this practice. Perhaps, Azerbaijanis are the only people in the world who touch the person who accidentally steps on their foot!

If a kitchen utensil—a spoon, a fork or a knife—falls to the floor, you'll have guests in your home.

Qaşq, çəngəl, bıçaq yerə düşəndə evə qonaq gələr.

Again, depending upon which implement is dropped, you'll be visited by a male or a female guest.

Çəngəl yerə düşəndə kişi qonaq gəlir.

When a fork falls on the floor, a male guest comes.

Qaşq yerə düşəndə qadın qonağı gəlir.

When a spoon falls on the floor, a female guest comes.

Some people have tried this and it actually seems to work for them. When kitchen utensils accidentally fall on the floor, not long afterwards, they get guests. It doesn't work that way in my family; actually, we don't pay much attention to it. Besides, it doesn't seem to matter whether we drop our

spoons or forks or not, we always seem to have guests. But still that doesn't keep us from saying: "We'll have guests" when we do drop something. That's what is so interesting about folklore in general. Even if you don't believe these things, you still repeat them and pass them on.

Whoever leaves food on his plate will have an ugly fiancé.

Qabında xörək saxlayan nişanlısı çirkin olar.

We've been told this one since childhood. It seems this was the way our mothers convinced us to eat all our food. Not only did we clean our plates, but we start competing and comparing plates to decide who will have the most beautiful or handsome spouse.

Sometimes, I don't know where I pick up ideas expressed in these beliefs. Definitely, I've heard them somewhere because subconsciously I follow them. For example, I don't like to leave the pointed ends of a scissors open. Subconsciously, I feel that something bad might happen, and now as I read our folklore collections in books, I discover this belief.

Don't leave the scissors' "mouth" open, otherwise you'll open your enemies' mouth.

Qayçının ağzını açıq qoymazlar, yoxsa düşmənlərinin ağzını açmış olarsən.

Here, of course, "opening your enemies' mouth" means that people will say bad things about you.

Here's another example of a belief that I can't trace its origins in my life:

Don't leave a book open when you go to bed, you'll lose your memory.

Kitabı açıq qoyub yatmazlar, yaddaşsız olarsən.

I don't remember ever hearing about the bad consequences of this belief. I'm reading about it now for the first time. However, it's true: I find myself not leaving a book open if I'm not reading it. Perhaps, somebody told me this in the past and it made an impression on me.

You shouldn't sew your clothes while wearing them, something bad will happen.

Əyində paltar tikməzlər, şərə düşərsən.

I remember once when I was walking out of the door at home, I suddenly discovered that the button on my coat was loose and about to fall off. I asked my grandmother to sew it back very quickly. But she insisted that I take my coat off first: "You shouldn't sew your clothes while wearing them, something bad will happen."



If pepper is spilled, there will be a quarrel.
İstiot dağılanda dava düşər.

Since pepper is hot, it is believed that if you accidentally spill it on the table, there will be a quarrel. But, again, there's a way to counter this negative possibility. Just put a small lump of sugar on the pepper and keep it there for some time before gathering it up. It's believed that sugar sweetens pepper and prevents quarrels from taking place.

This expression is also used with salt (duz) and can be countered with sugar or with water.

Don't go back [once you've started] on your way.
Yoldan qayıtmazlar.

Who hasn't left home and after awhile realized that they have forgotten something? Well, those who hold to this belief try to avoid returning back so they won't have bad luck. This is particularly true when the occasion is regarded as something special.

If you stare at some point thoughtfully, a person who is dear to you will come from some far place.
Gözün yol çəkirsə, uzaqdan yaxın adəmin gələc.

If a mirror breaks, something bad will happen.
Güzgünün sınması nə isə bir bədbəxtlik olacağını göstərir.

A child will die if you rock an empty cradle.
Nəninəni boş tərəpətsən uşaq ölər.

You shouldn't give an onion or garlic to someone in the evening. If you must do so, place it on the floor so that the person picks it himself. Don't place it directly into his hand.
Axşam evdən soğan/sarımsaq verməzlər.

Onion and garlic are sharp in taste. They symbolize tears. So, if you don't want to complicate another person's life and bring sorrow, handle onions and garlic with care.

Don't start an important job on Monday.
Bazar ertəsi vacib işə başlamazlar.

Monday is considered to be a difficult day. You wouldn't want to start a new important project on this first workday.

You shouldn't have a wedding party in May. May is an empty month.
Mayda toy eləməzlər. May boş aydır.

There are few fruits or vegetables in May. Most trees are just beginning to blossom. That's why it's considered to be an empty month—without abundance. Even young people these days rarely plan their wedding parties in May. Also, since independence, now that religion can be practiced more openly, couples don't marry during the month of Maharram (commemoration of the death of Imam Ali and his followers. No one organizes weddings at this time. This month is determined by the lunar calendar).

People throughout the world have their own set of beliefs just like we do in Azerbaijan. And as illogical as some of these ideas may seem, they provide the glue that unites people—not only to each other, but to our parents, our grandparents and often even their grandparents. We have an expression: "Grass grows from its roots" (**Ot kökü üstə bitir**). Maybe that's why these expressions have become so much a part of our lives and why we pass them down to the next generation. In truth, "we do grow from our roots."

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