

## **Uzbekistan: Cot Hazards Ignored**

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Uzbeks dismiss medics' advice over dangers of traditional cots.

A thousand-year-old tradition is putting the lives of Uzbek babies at risk, warn doctors in Tashkent.

But they dare not speak too loudly, because the object of their warning is also a symbol of national identity, passed down proudly through the generations.

The culprit is a type of cradle - known as a beshik - used for centuries to rock Central Asian babies to sleep.

Research by doctors from Uzbekistan and abroad now shows that babies placed in this sort of cot run a higher risk of growing up brain damaged or deformed.

The beshik is small and narrow, and the baby placed snugly inside it is left very little room for movement. It has an aperture and a pot, which serve as a toilet for the child. Mothers say this spares them the hassle of changing nappies. They also point out that babies sleep better and longer because they can be rocked rhythmically - the cot's legs are similar to a rocking chair's.

According to medical experts, however, these are exactly the things that make it so dangerous.

"A person who loves their child will never put it in a beshik," said professor Rishat Osmonov, who heads the department for children's traumatology, orthopaedy and neurosurgery at the Andijan state medical institute. "A child's development is in its movement, movement is life."

His colleague, professor Mamazoir Khojamberdiev, recently reported that forcefully rocking a child in a beshik can cause cerebral haemorrhages, brain tumours and fractures to the fragile skull of an infant.

His findings are backed by research conducted over a decade ago by a team of Scottish paediatricians in the Fergana valley. They found that roughly 25 in every 100,000 children rocked in the beshik ended up with serious brain damage.

However, Uzbek mothers still think they know best, and it will take more than expert medical advice to get them to abandon the traditional cot.

"Why is a child put in a beshik?" repeated 62-year-old Munavvar Akhmedova, as if being asked to state the obvious. "Well, so that a mother can make use of the time while the child is there to get a lot of housework done."

The younger generation feels the same. Aziz Maksudov, 21, from Tashkent has yet to get married, but says he can't even imagine having a family without a cradle.

He believes it is essential to any Uzbek household. "There were six children in our family and we all grew

up in a beshik," he said.

The cot has been around for so long in Central Asia, no one is really sure where it came from.

The earliest mentions of it appear in the Turkic writings of the 11th century Central Asian philologist, Mahmud Kashgari. Some scholars have said it was an innovation brought in by invading tribes and adopted by locals, who found it allowed them to continue working while leaving their young offspring unsupervised but relatively secure.

One Andijan historian, who preferred not to be named, says it was exploited by the Soviet authorities. He described how young mothers were sent to work in cotton fields while their babies were laid out in rows of beshiks in camps - adding that nannies who watched over the infants also fed them a mild opium-based preparation to stop them from crying.

As a result of the beshik and this early exposure to narcotics, he says, many children grew up to be weak and sickly.

A local medical expert, who also preferred not to be named, says infant health has improved little since Soviet times, but the beshik is only part of the problem.

Estimating that 8 out of 10 Uzbek children born today are weak, sickly or have abnormalities, he asks, "How can an unhealthy mother give birth to a healthy child? The majority of parents suffer from anaemia or other diseases. And what's more, the poor child is wrapped up like a mummy and put in the beshik for hours on end."

Professor Osmonov believes the beshik's main problem is that it immobilises the child. Constricted in the cradle for 10-15 hours a day, bones grow crooked, muscles weaken and the metabolism suffers. "Additionally, children who are put in beshiks are more likely to develop abnormal hip bones and sacral bones," said Osmonov.

A macabre incident in Uchkurgan region of Namangan highlighted another danger to babies swaddled in their cots - they are easy meat for ravenous rodents. People still talk of the case of a child who had its face gnawed off by rats in 2000, having been left tightly swaddled and unprotected.

Nonetheless, many Uzbeks continue to swear by their beshiks. They maintain that the accidents and injuries only occur if the cradle is used incorrectly.

"You can't keep a child in a beshik all the time, you need to change its position when you feed it," said 31-year-old Marufjona Rakhmatova from Tashkent. "My child has crooked legs, but it wasn't because of the beshik."

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