

The Efta (“The Seven”): Additional Information by Aphrodite Matsakis 2017

(Sources: *Bulfinches’ Greek and Roman Mythology*, by Thomas Bulfinch, 2000 edition, NY: Dover Publications; *The Custom of the Efta in Karpathos*, by Menas Alexiades, 2001, Athens: Pope Xiotake-Skeuoflaka; attendance at Efta while visiting Karpathos; and communications with Karpathian relatives and friends)

The Efta, an ancient ritual performed on the 7th day after the birth of a child, has been cited as being unique to the Dodecanese island of Karpathos. According to other sources, however, the Efta was (and to some extent, may still be) observed in Rhodes, Halki, and other Dodecanese islands, but in a far less ritualized and extensive manner than in Karpathos, where it is still practiced.

Some of the particulars of the Efta have changed over time and, even today, often vary from one of Karpathos’ twelve villages to the next. But the basics of this custom remain unchanged: The Efta takes place in the family home; and only people close to the family attend. The mother lays or sits in bed with the newborn; the father stands next to them; and nearby is a table with a large silver tray.

After the guests arrive, the baby is wrapped in a silk sheet and placed on the silver tray. Traditionally the maternal grandmother (and/or other close relative and/or, in the past, the midwife) are the ones who wrap the baby in the silk sheet.

If the baby is a boy, it is then wrapped in (or passed through) the mother’s best blouse; if a girl, in or through the father’s best shirt. This part of the Efta symbolizes the child’s need to love and respect its opposite sex parent.

The baby is then swung back and forth in the silk sheet held at the ends by two *protokoris*

(i.e., first-born daughters) whose parents are still alive. As the girls rock the baby, they sing *mandinathes* (rhymed couplets or song-poems) that honor and praise the child's parents and grandparents. Although the child's father and paternal grandparents are usually included in these praises, depending on the village and the particular family involved, the emphasis tends to be on the child's mother and maternal grandmother.

Meanwhile, the grandmother or other close female relative brings out the Aleuvra and places it on the table. The Aleuvra--a gooey mixture of wheat, salt, and water spiced with cinnamon and cloves--symbolizes the essentials of life. Although soft enough to be cut by a fork, the Aleuvra is firm enough to be shaped like a crater with a hole in the middle.

Inside the crater are honey and butter, symbolizing wishes for a rich and sweet life for the child. (Sometimes the honey and butter are put in separate bowls.)

The Aleuvra is then surrounded by seven bowls of sugar, each holding a thin candle. One candle is for Christ; another, for the Virgin Mary; and the remaining five, for various Christian saints. Typically, but not always, the saints selected are those who have churches named after them on Karpathos, especially saints whose churches are located in the village of one of the parents or other family member.

According to custom, as a boy recites the Nicene Creed (the official creed of the Greek Orthodox Church, often referred to as the *pisteuo*), the candles are lit. In today's Karpathos, however, sometimes the *pisteuo* is omitted. Also, sometimes the candles are lit prior to the guests' arrival to help insure that one of the candles named after a saint will extinguish during the celebration.

In any case, the candle that extinguishes first will signify which saint will be the child's

patron saint and protect the child from harm for the rest of its life. Then, traditionally, 40 days after the child's birth (the *sarakosti*), the family provides for and attend a liturgy for that saint.

As everyone at the Efta celebration anxiously waits to see which candle will be extinguished first, each guest comes up to the parents, places a gift of gold (or money or a small religious item) on the silver plate, takes a forkful of the *Aleuvra*, dips it into the honey and butter, and eats it. After eating seven forkfuls, the guest congratulates the child's parents and its other relatives and make wishes for the newborn and its family members.

This blessing can be silent, spoken, or sung in the form of a highly personal and original poem (*mandintha*) created especially for the parent, child, or grandparents. In the past especially, *mandinthes* were composed prior to the Efta and written copies were given to the parents.

Afterwards everyone enjoys food and drink provided by the grandparents and other relatives. The merriment can go on indefinitely.

When the party is over, the remaining food is given to the guests to take home. But (traditionally) the remaining Aleuvra is left sitting on the silver tray for the child's patron saint who was expected to show up that night after everyone was asleep in order to bless the child and endow it with the special gifts associated with that particular saint.

The Efta described by _____ in his book is far more elaborate than described here and apparently was practiced for centuries prior to the advent of modern technology and the migration of many Karpathians to other countries.

In the past, some Karpathians allegedly set aside a portion of the remaining Aleuvra for the "evil spirits" and dumped it somewhere far from the home. The hope was that if these evil spirits were appeased by being given something to eat, they would leave the newborn and its family

alone.

In pre-Christian days the Aleuvra was surrounded by twelve bowls of sugar, each holding a thin candle. Each candle was named after one of the twelve daughters of Zeus and Memory. Three of the daughters are the familiar muses of Love, Charity and Grace; the remaining nine are the muses or goddesses of various forms of art and science.

Although scholars still argue about which muse was responsible for which aspect of creativity, there is a general consensus that the following list is fairly accurate:

Cleo, Goddess of storytelling and, by extension, of history;

Urania, Goddess of plot structure, and by extension, of astronomy because the stars were seen to dictate fate;

Melopmene, Goddess of tragedy and drama;

Thalia, Goddess of comedy;

Terpsichore, Goddess of rhythm, timing, and pace and hence of dance;

Calliope, Goddess of thematic coherence and guardian of epic poetry and novels;

Erato, Goddess muse of love poetry;

Polymnia, Goddess of divinely perfect word choice, sacred poetry, and hymns to the gods (which demand the highest polish); and

Euterpre, Goddess of lyric poetry.

The candle that burnt out first was seen as indicating the goddess or muse who would endow the newborn with the gift of her special ability.