

THE EVIL EYE: PREVENTION, DETECTION, REMOVAL

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The aim of the present paper is to give some information on the safeguards, detection and neutralisation of the harmful effects of the evil eye, with particular reference to the very old custom of fumigating sick animals, *Tbahhir ta' l-animali*, as a possible cure from the effects of that harmful gaze. .

THE EVIL EYE AND SAFEGUARDS AGAINST IT The evil-eye, or the belief in the power of some individuals to cause harm to man, animals or objects by merely looking at them, is very widespread in the circum-Mediterranean countries particularly Morocco, Libya, Malta, Sicily and southern Italy. Countryfolk in all these places have consequently devised various means to ward off such destructive power. In Malta, these include:

Fixtures:- protective cattle horns (single or double) and cobwebs;

Gestures:- the horned hand, making the sign of the cross over the abdomen, esp. in pregnant women;

Exclamations invoking Divine protection:- like *Alla jbierek* (God bless); *Alla jharsek minn kull ghajn* (May God protect you from any evil eye); *Alla jseddaqhomlok* (May God protect your animals and make them healthy) or **Exclamations** like *Ghajnek f'sormu / f'sormha* or more politely, *Ghajnek f'ghajnu/ f'ghajnha* - beseeching the wicked gaze of the eye-undesirable person to enter the back passage of the human / animal anatomy, where its destructive force is lost in the darkness of that inhospitable environment. This exclamation is generally used whenever a horse is praised within hearing distance of its owner or whenever a lovely girl is audibly complimented on her figure and beauty in the presence of her overprotective mother;

Wearing safeguards: Holy Medals, and / or amulets like a small gold horned-hand, a cowry (*bahbuha*) around children's neck (Cassar 1965: 426); a pointed shark's tooth, mounted cock spurs (single or double) resembling respectively a single horn (*bzaru*) or a double horn (*qrun*) hanging from a *polka* (watch chain) in adults; a mounted

turquoise stone (Zammit Maempel, 1968); and diamonds placed on babies. The Birkirkara Village midwife Maria Zammit, informed the author in 1960 that this custom was introduced into the village by wealthy refugees from Bormla, Birgu and l-Isla during the War years (1940-43).

Actions:- Carrying on one's person a blessed olive leaf. In very olden times it was also customary to carry some wax from candles used during the Holy Week celebrations. Cassar (1965:426) refers also to pieces of wax from this candle stuck to children's forehead. This custom, however, has long died out, just like that of cutting a piece from the clothing of an evil-eye undesirable and burning it, preferably in his presence, if he enters your house.

The above devices against the evil-eye have been dealt with at some length in the present author's contribution to the British ethnographic review *Folklore* of Spring 1968. It should be remembered however, that no matter what amount of protective devices adopted to keep the harmful effects of the evil eye at bay, there are always cases when these defenses 'fail', and measures have to be taken to eliminate completely, or at least to mitigate the harm done by the evil gaze.

DETECTING THE PRESENCE OF THE EVIL EYE A 50-year old female farmer from Har Gharghur, but originating from Mellieha, informed the author (7/3/1967) that before initiating procedures to eliminate the harmful effects of the evil eye one must first ascertain that there actually is a case of Evil-Eye. The method used by her family to ascertain this was explained to the author as follows: "Place and burn in a saucer olive leaves and twigs (*weraq u zkuk taż-żebbuġ*) blessed in Church in Easter to ward off the evil eye, sprinkle some salt crystals, place the hands over the saucer in the same way the priest lays his over the chalice during Mass and watch carefully what follows. If the smoke emitted is *white*, if the salt starts crackling and if the hands start sweating, then it is absolutely certain that an evil eye has been cast on your house and consequently fumigate (*Baħħar*).

Another female informer of about the same age, a teacher in a Government Elementary School at Birkirkara, gave the author a somewhat different -- if not an opposite -- version. This was based, not on the colour of the fumigation *smoke*

(*duhhan*) but on that of the actual *fumigation material* (*Iż-żebbuġ, it-tbahhir*). If this turned black (*jekk it-tbahhir isir iswed*) the sick man being fumigated definitely had the evil eye. Consequently, one had to recite an Our Father, a Hail Mary and a Glory be to the 'Madonna of Rome' to protect him and us from evil glances, and to send back the cast evil eye (*talb lill-Madonna ta' Ruma biex tharisna mill-ghajnejn il-hżiena u jekk hemm xi haġa hazina, din tmur lura*). Should however, the fumigation material turn **white**, the sick man will recover. In that case the Kreed is to be recited in remembrance of the greeting with olives and palm fronds Our Lord had upon his entrance in Jerusalem. (Personal communication, Miss Bezzina, B'Kara 16/3/76).

REMOVING THE EVIL EYE BY FUMIGATION The ordinary process adopted to eliminate the harmful effects of the evil eye, known locally as *Tbahhir*, is outlined below.

Tbahhir was once a very popular custom with Maltese country people. In English it is referred to as Fumigation, meaning the application of smoke or gas for the purpose of disinfecting or destroying pests. It is interesting to note that the harmful effects of the evil-eye are treated as if they were bugs or pests. Fumigate them with smoke originating from blessed olive leaves and destroy them completely with prayers and religious invocations. It will be noted that the whole process is a combination of pagan superstition and pious religious devotion. As regards who had the power to fumigate, the informative middle aged woman stated that at Mellieħa, where the custom was still (1965) much in use, there were special persons for the purpose. She stressed that not everyone could carry out this service. Only women could fumigate, but those with an evil tongue against their neighbours were not allowed to do so.

The best indication for Fumigation is when the evil-eye is seriously suspected when things start repeatedly going wrong or if there is a long sequence of illnesses in the family. It is then time to take proper measures to eliminate the effects of that disastrous gaze. Thus, Giuseppe Zahra, a 60 year old baker's son from Birkirkara, informed the author (11/8/1967) that his mother used to fumigate the bakery and the oven whenever a number of their clients made repeated complaints that the bread was

lumpy or not good enough. Fumigation is not a means to avert the evil-eye, but a way to remove its harmful effects.

The author's inquisitive question on how to fumigate received the reply that much depended on what was being fumigated --- whether a house, a bakery, an office, an aviary or an animal. For a residence and such like inanimate structures the method most usually adopted was that of burning blessed olive leaves and twigs in a saucer, and going round the rooms carrying the saucer whilst uttering aloud some ordinary everyday prayers, as the Lord's Prayer, Hail Holy Queen, or the Creed (Birkirkara, Hal Qormi). To fumigate a sick animal, the ritual is (or rather was up to 1965) that of carrying the smoking material in the hand and going around the animal uttering requests for divine help to remove the effects of the evil eye.

Different localities adopted slightly different ways of fumigating. Thus, at Naxxar, it was customary to place the blessed olive leaves and twigs in a frying pan instead of a saucer adding some large salt crystals, a piece of wax from a *Xema' tat-Tniebri* (candle used in Holy Week celebrations) and a piece of cloth from the dress of the person suspected to have cast the evil-eye and caused the harm. One could then burn the contents and fumigate.

The informer made great stress on two points: first that the blessed olive leaves and twigs should not be from the same household (*mhux minn ta' gewwa, mhux minn tad-dar*), but should rather be procured from those persons whose business it was to fumigate. Secondly, it was important not to leave the ashes in the house. These were to be thrown on the doorstep, or in front, of the house of the person suspected as the source of the evil-eye (Personal communication, Midwife Teresa Galea, Naxxar, 11/3/1967). It is interesting to note that about 400 years ago, the fumigating material used by some Naxxar parishioners consisted of laurel leaves, not olive leaves (Dusina, 1575 fol.121).

In a Xewkija (Gozo) version, the fumigation material is composed of dried blessed olive leaves and a piece of wax from blessed Candlemas candles (*tal-Gandlora*) placed in an earthenware frying pan (*pagna*) and burnt. Table salt crystals are added only if there is definite evidence of the evil eye. The ceremony

starts with a sign of the cross on the pan, followed by the fumigation of every corner of the house, the family, children, including animal members of the household. 'San Barnabaw' (St. Barnabas) is invoked and implored to remove any evil from the house: '*San Barnabaw, oħroġulna l-barra minn hawn*'. The author's desire to know why this particular saint was invoked remained unanswered. As there is nothing in his life that could possibly connect him with this ritual, it is presumed that the name was chosen for rhyming purposes. The Xewkija version directed also that the ashes be thrown either beneath the pavement (*taħt il-bankina*) or at a cross roads (*f'salib it-toroq*) (Personal communication, Pawlu Aquilina, 70 years old, living at St. Andrews, but hailing from Xewkija, Gozo, 9/3/67)

The invocation of saints to remove the evil eye reminds the author of a ritual he had witnessed at the farm of Indri M. at Maghatab, a hamlet in the Parish of Naxxar, on 17th October 1965. Upon arrival at this outlying farm, the entire extended family of the farmer was found gathered at the entrance to the pigsty adjoining their farmhouse. They were participating in a fumigation ceremony around a large pig lying motionless on the ground. A young married female was 'officiating'. She carried in her hand an inverted metal-pot cover containing smoking blessed olive leaves and twigs, a sprinkle of large salt crystals, some oil and some wax from candles that had been used in Holy Week celebrations (*Xema' tat-Tniebri*). Whilst going around the pig, the woman uttered aloud certain petitions which the author had never heard before, but which the entire family knew pretty well as they were all loudly reciting the same exclamations. These were:

San Pietru u San Pawl, jekk hawn xi ġħajn ħazina, oħroġha 'l barra minn hawn.

San Pawl ta' Ruma jekk hawn xi ġħajn ħazina raġġaġħha lura.

San Barnabaw, jekk hawn xi ġħajn ħazina oħroġha l-barra minn hawn.

(St. Peter and St. Pawl, if there is the evil eye, take it away; St. Paul of Rome, if there is the evil eye, sent it away; St Barnabas (again him!), if there is any evil eye, take it away).

The sister in law who furnished the author with an explanation of the goings-on and the composition of the fumigating material asserted that this was the version of

the Har Gharghur farmers. The Naxxar countryfolk, she said, used exactly the same intercessions but added a half penny (*sitt habbiet*) wrapped in a piece of black cloth to the fumigation material. No explanation was provided for this addenda. The event and ritual seen by the author on that October morning in 1965 was quite a surprise. The habit of fumigating sick animals was already being practiced by the Naxxar parishioners (and Magħatab is part of that Parish) as early as 1575, but the women who fumigated their sick animals with 'laurel leaves' had already been reprimanded by the Bishop of the time (presumably Bishop Royas) and had promised not to persist in their actions.

During his stay on the Island the Apostolic Delegate Mgr Dusina, who was then investigating the moral and physical aspect of the Church on the Maltese Islands, assembled all the parish priests at St. Augustine Church in Rabat, Malta for an interview. Each had to reply to a set of 17 questions relating to self and his parish (Dusina, fol. 191-192; Aquilina & Fiorini, 196-197). It was on Saturday 29th January 1575 that the Parish Priest of Naxxar, '*Donnus Julianus Borgius*' appeared before Mgr Dusina (Aquilina & Fiorini, 1971: 391). In reply to the fifth question the young Dun Giljan Borg reported that in his village there were some women who went round their sick animals fumigating them with laurel leaves whilst uttering certain invocations. The case of these women had by then already been dealt with by the Bishop who made them promise not to repeat their rituals --- '*et sono uscite con plegiaria*' (Dusina 1575 fol. 212; Aquilina & Fiorini, eds. 2001:217). Naxxar was the only parish to report fumigation of animals. Paul Cassar (1965:426) also alludes to this habit of the Naxxar farmers in his *Medical History of Malta*.

It is very interesting to see how deeply rooted this old custom of fumigating sick animals is in the Naxxar farmers. In time the fumigating agent changed from laurel to olive leaves and possibly also the invocations changed. However, as the parish priest of Naxxar declared to the Apostolic Delegate that '*le parole che dicono no le so*' it is not possible to ascertain what the previous invocations were. One thing is sure, however, that in spite of the Church admonitions and censorship 400 years earlier Naxxar parishioners in 1965 were still persisting in the same practices and rituals of

fumigating their sick animals and of devoutly requesting the assistance of some supernatural power to chase away the effects of the evil eyeexactly as they were doing in 1575 when they were admonished by their Bishop.

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Tbahhir nhar Sibt il-Glorja (*tpingija ta' G.Lanfranco, 1975*)