

BIRTH AND THE EVIL EYE

The ritual impurity of the mother and child makes them most susceptible to the influence of the evil eye. It is not only anger, jealousy and feelings of enmity, but praise, admiration and well-wishing which can injure the child by arousing the malice of envious spirits. It is therefore considered unlucky to express any admiration for a baby without saying the special formula: *Ikun imbierek Alla*, "God be praised". This custom is to be found among various peoples, depending upon the nationality of the people and with their religious faith. In the Near East for example, for anyone to praise a child's beauty is "most dangerous and worse than an insult". In Greece, where susceptibility to the evil eye was greatly believed in, during childbirth all mirrors were removed from the room, since it was considered possible to cast the evil eye on oneself.

In Morocco, when the look of a person is accompanied with words of praise the danger is considered so great that it is always necessary to add, as a precaution, the phrase *tbark allah*, "May God be blessed" (Fez); or, *Gul tbark llah, llah ya tek la'ma fi l-a'ainin*, say "May God be blessed", "May God make your eyes blind" (Ulad Bu' aziz). E. Westermarck hold that one reason why words of praise or admiration are considered so dangerous is no doubt that they are often connected with envy; but this cannot be the only reason. Evil effects are expressly attributed to them even in cases where the person who speaks is entirely free from any such feeling. In accordance with one of the laws of the association of ideas, which generally play such an important part in many magical beliefs, namely the law of association by contrast, the praise or admiration of something good readily recalls its opposite — the more so as the future is always uncertain and is not to be relied upon.

The supernatural notion in the attitudes to fate and the future of the child can be seen in the avoidance of weighing the child, which is again based on the fear of the evil eye. Young mothers in Malta many a time avoided going around the streets with their young babies, lest they become victims of the evil eye. Avoidance of exposure was considered to be the safest precaution.

The full breasts of the mother giving milk to her young can also be the victim of the evil eye. Žaren Borġ from Dingli, spoke of his wife as possessing shrivelled breasts for four whole years as a consequence of the evil eye. Il-Bukaćina, from Nadur, however when asked whether she used to breast-feed her children in front of others, remarked rather

humorously: *Se jghinulek il-bezzula?*, "Are they going to cast the evil eye on your nipple?" Žaren Axisa from Axiaq was of the opinion that this habit of breast-feeding in public was the habit of those women who felt no shame in doing it. Breast-feeding was a widespread custom, producing a sense of guilt if not followed. Mr. Axisa is of the opinion that mothers who do not breast-feed their children run the risk of tuberculosis, because the breasts do not purify themselves. The general idea in the past held that whilst a woman is suckling she cannot be pregnant.

Various anecdotes, narrated by individuals, speak of the influence of the evil eye, to which they attribute most of the ailments visiting their young. They tend to explain and interpret all natural phenomena either by the intervention of saints if the effect is good, or by some magico-supernatural power, such as the evil eye, if the results are harmful.

The evil eye is considered to have a most devastating effect on piglets and young rabbits, particularly the latter. Hence, the use of the horns, which are said to serve in order that a stranger's eye will strike the horn either at the tip or at the centre of the set. Such movement of the eye is considered to be quite sufficient to destroy the "electro-magnetic influence" of the evil-eyed person.



The evil eye can be "at work" even before a child is born . . .

DOCUMENTATION

(*Literal translation from Maltese*)

Conversation 1

I had a child of about seven months. And a woman said of her: Just look at Lonza's child. She took it with her to the shop, and when she brought her back, she already looked weak. And that was the beginning of the end. She was the death of her. The evil eye dries up your heart.

Conversation 2

The evil eye exists, although only one in a thousand is endowed with its power. I admit that it once happened to me. I had a couple of rabbits we had bought from Ġanni ta' Kalċi. And a stranger came to my house. It was the time when my Karmni was going to Australia and these two rabbits stood gazing at us – we were at table – they were munching some bread and what did she do? They were eating with their ears uplifted with the piece of bread in their mouth. What I'm telling you is true as Our Lady is my witness. And she said to them: Let them be (the informant) because he does not believe. The rabbits froze in that position. Because he used to tell me. Out of so many lovely English children why should they cast the evil eye on your child? Because that was what I used to tell my wife. And they left them as they were. This incident made me believe in the evil eye... Well, I had two children. When my wife had the first one, a woman told her: Cover your breast because it is letting out milk. As from that moment the milk did not come out from the nipple but from her armpit. This went on for four years and in the meantime she had no children. My wife used to leave the house at five in the morning and return at five in the afternoon, always travelling on horseback doing all kinds of business. When we had the second child, she was than nine months old. My wife had to go to Rabat and took the child with her. When she was at Rabat she entered a shop and the owner took the child in her arms and said: "Praise God, look what a lovely child she has, how plumpy she is, and you always on the move, day and night." When she returned home the child had a fit and died the next morning.

Conversation 3

The evil eye is dangerous. It is cast by someone who is envious of you. You live in peace minding your own business whereas she can never find peace. And so she is envious of you and so she brings ruin. She can cause pots to slip from a wall. She can make a whole family ill. The man (with the evil eye) without wanting to, thinks about you all the time. You're always in his mind for no special reason, deep in his mind. Once there was a man who told a priest that he wasn't going to see his canaries which he (the priest)

had because he had the evil eye. But the priest said to him: This is just nonsense. He went to see them and on the following day (the priest) found them all dead. It is unbelievable. There is nothing worse than the evil eye and spells. Spells are even worse because they are too powerful.

Conversation 4

I visited an acquaintance and as I entered I saw an egg-cup on the umbrella rack with an egg in it. I asked her: What does this signify? She told me: It is there to attract the evil eye and to avoid that its gaze be directed on anything else. This happened at Pietà. And it is common usage.

Conversation 5

We used to place the olives for fumigation on a plate. Then we used to set it aflame and we used to take it all around the place. We used to apply a wild thyme or else it wouldn't light. And we used to say seven credos and seven Hail Marys.

Conversation 6

They burnt olives. And they used to place it on a spade or a piece of wood. And you fumigate someone or something which has some ailment: What a lovely girl Marija has. She began to rub her eye and on the following day her eyesight weakened. We had a first class cow. We had a first class sheep. Both of them fell under the malign influence of the evil eye. The cow charged someone and the sheep did not give anymore milk. This happened in Żebbieh. We let certain people in but others we don't, not to let them look at the animals. The tongue is at the back of all this. Don't be over enthusiastic about any object or else something unexpected might happen to it. We used to say the rosary not to fall victims of the evil eye. The horn was used to indicate possession of a calf or a cow – They used to place a calf so as people might take the cow to it. Żeppi Nahhola from Rabat used to place a horn on the door and Pietru tal-Kapton from Biżbizija had even the calf.

Tarcisio Zarb

FURTHER READING

E. Westermarck, *Ritual and Belief in Morocco*, Vol. II, London, 1926, p. 418.

G. Zammit-Maempel, *The Evil Eye and Protective Cattle Horns in Malta*, in *Folklore*, Vol. 79, Spring 1968, p. 4.

RECORDED CONVERSATIONS

A. Zarb, a 54-year-old from Birkirkara, August 1974.

S. Borg, a 50-year-old from Żabbar, May 1974.

Z. Mifsud, 75-year-old from Dingli, March 1974.

A. Smith, 80-year-old from Valletta, February 1974.

K. Camilleri, 75-year-old from Imġarr, September 1975.

T. Muscat, 82-year-old from Imġarr, October 1975.