

THE CULTURAL ENACTMENT OF EVIL EYE: AN ETHNOGRAPHY OF STRANGE POWER AND WELL-BEING

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the cultural enactment of the evil eye (*nazar*) within Pakistani society, analyzing its significance as a symbol of both protection and social well-being. Drawing from a personal narrative that illustrates the profound impact of *nazar* beliefs on family dynamics and health, the study employs Clifford Geertz's interpretive anthropology as a framework for understanding the intricate rituals, amulets, and linguistic expressions associated with this phenomenon. Through ethnographic methods, including participant observations and narratives, the research highlights how practices such as the burning of chillies and the use of black amulets serve not only as remedies for perceived malevolent forces but also as mechanisms for fostering psychological comfort and social cohesion. The findings reveal that the belief in the evil eye transcends mere superstition; it is a vital cultural construct that helps individuals navigate envy, maintain harmony, and promote overall well-being within their communities. This investigation underscores the enduring relevance of cultural symbols in shaping human experiences and reinforcing communal bonds.

Keywords: Evil eye, Well-being, Symbolic power.

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INTRODUCTION

A few days earlier, my younger brother had been the center of attention at a family gathering, praised for his intelligence and good looks. Shortly after, he developed a severe fever and inexplicable fatigue. Traditional medicine offered no immediate explanation or cure. My mother, deeply rooted in our cultural traditions, was convinced that he had fallen victim to the "nazar" (evil eye). She quickly arranged for a local healer to perform a ritual involving burning chillies and mustard seeds to counteract the malevolent gaze. Miraculously, or so it seemed, my brother began to recover soon after. This personal experience is a powerful testament to the deep-seated belief in the evil eye within Pakistani culture and the measures taken to protect against its perceived effects.

In this paper, I would discuss the idea of *nazar*, its beliefs, practices, and its importance in daily life. I will also discuss how it is considered as a strange power that can either benefit or harm the parties involved and what impacts it is assumed to leave on well-being. *Nazar* is a word used in many languages like Arabic with meaning surveillance, sight, and attention, and in Persian as a chasm. In a broader sense, it is locally termed as an evil eye. Many cultures around the world have long believed in the concept of the evil eye which includes the Mediterranean region, particularly Italy, Greece, the Arab world, Spain, Portugal, etc. (Berger, 2011). Blue eye amulets are commonly used in Greece and Turkey against evil eye (Serotte, 2006). There are many phrases used in India and Pakistan like *chasm e baddoor* which means evil eyes off. A common belief is that the victim of *nazar* becomes unwell due to envy, jealousy, or a harmful intention of the people. Religions also strengthen the belief in the idea for example *hasad* (meaning jealousy) in Islam which means wishing loss for other people. Muslims often use the phrase "*Mashallah*" (God has willed it) when admiring someone's success or beauty, a linguistic strategy to protect against envy and the evil eye. To avoid being envied, religion also advises the recitation of the holy verses.

Well-being or wellness is a subjective idea and it does not necessarily have to be in a biological sense rather it could be social, economic, and political for instance. For example, a belief that one suffers from economic loss or academic downfall, due to an evil spirit or envy of

other people that compromises its well-being then it might be as big a concern as having extreme biological distress. The existence of religious healing and folk methods of preventing sorcery and evil is an example of medical pluralism (Bhasin, 2007). Many obscure yet obvious ways to ensure well-being are widely practiced by people in general which scientifically may seem "illogical" but the reason operates logically in the common sense of the people.

The vital aspect is that there is a well-established framework of indigenous healing that not only coexists with the biomedical framework but is also believed to facilitate and enable its functioning. This is why it is widely practiced in different ways across the country where the underlying agenda is to keep the individual free of the evil powers that may have possessed them.

PROBLEMATIZATION OF THE TOPIC

The evil eye, often dismissed as mere superstition, is underexplored in terms of its functional and symbolic significance within cultural systems. Much of the existing literature treats the evil eye as a relic of archaic belief systems, failing to recognize its ongoing relevance and utility in contemporary societies. This oversight neglects the potential for understanding how such beliefs contribute to social cohesion and individual well-being. By problematizing the evil eye as a subject of serious anthropological inquiry, we can uncover the deeper meanings and functions it serves within various cultural contexts. Here, I am particularly interested in the ways used to ward off evil power in a common Pakistani neighborhood which are used to promote well-being. I am taking these ways as symbols which are in operation in the everyday lives of people throughout they live.

RESEARCH QUESTION

How does the cultural enactment of the evil eye function as a symbolic mechanism for ensuring well-being in Pakistani Society?

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study employs Clifford Geertz's interpretive anthropology as its primary theoretical framework. Geertz's approach emphasizes

understanding cultures through their symbols, which he describes as vehicles of meaning. According to Geertz, symbols are not passive reflections of social reality but active shapers of it. They organize experience and guide behavior; providing frameworks within which individuals understand their world and their place in it (Geertz, 1973).

Geertz's theory is particularly well-suited to analyzing the evil eye in Pakistan's context because it highlights how cultural symbols embody and transmit complex systems of meaning. This perspective allows us to see the evil eye not just as a superstitious belief, but as a potent symbol that influences social interaction, psychological states, and community well-being. Geertz's notion of "thick description" is also integral to this analysis. Thick description involves detailed accounts of social actions that reveal the underlying cultural meanings. This method is used to explore the rituals, amulets, and linguistic expressions associated with the evil eye, providing a comprehensive understanding of its symbolic power.

EMPIRICAL FINDINGS

The concept of the evil eye and its treatment has fascinated me since childhood. This concept first came to me when my parents built a house and placed a clay pot upside down on the roof wall of the house. This practice was not done for any decorative purpose as I thought at the time, but to ward off bad omens, especially *nazar*, or any other harm. To my surprise, this was not an unusual occurrence and I could easily find similar items but most were clay pots placed on the roofs of other houses in the locality. Placing doors or wall hangings with religious words which are believed to keep the place free from bad spirits is also a common practice in many households.

The existence of religious healing and folk methods of preventing sorcery and evil is an example of medical pluralism (Bhasin, 2007). Many obscure yet obvious ways to ensure well-being are widely practiced by people in general which scientifically may seem "illogical" but the reason operates logically in the common sense of the people.

This paper aims to address these puzzles which would help enhance the understanding of wellbeing by documenting the stories of different households about nazar and its cure. It does not take into account the aptitude of the healing practices rather the beliefs, treatments, and perceptions of the people are mainly focused on. Methodologically, it includes the narratives of the people and personal observations and experiences through participation. People's willingness to participate is prioritized during the data collection process.

Nazar: Beliefs and remedies

Using Geertz's notion of "thick description," I delve into the detailed practices surrounding the evil eye in Pakistan. For example, the ritual of burning chillies and mustard seeds in Punjab is a rich cultural thing. It reveals not only the immediate intent to cure the afflicted but also the underlying cultural logic that attributes misfortune to envy and external malevolent forces. This ritual reflects a worldview where balance and harmony must be actively maintained through culturally sanctioned practices. Every household has its specific ways of prevention and treatment for nazar. The following part includes the possible remedies for it as well as the logic behind the concept which would help make sense of the "common sense" of every household.

The process of safeguarding from nazar begins right after birth. For example, a black mark (usually behind the ears) is applied to their newborns to protect them from the evil eye. Newly born kids are considered most vulnerable and exposed to evil eyes (*buri nazar*) as a lot of guests visit to see them and compliment them excessively. A practical way to protect children from it is to tie a black thread on the hand or around the neck which is preferred to be knotted 7 times. In some cases, when a child frequently cries and feels unrest, it is suggested to get it customized by any religious person in the community who recites religious verses on every knot which gives it a sacred entitlement.

Spitting twice on the child's face is another practice that is usually observed by the elderly of the family to reverse the effect. In most cases, an act of spitting is done symbolically instead of doing it. It symbolizes that the child became a little dirty and unclean so that spirit will not catch it. Other than these remedies, sacrificing chicken (preferably black) and animals such as goats is also considered an effective way to reduce the effect of evil spirits. Many people give money or food to charity as *sadaqah* which is advised to Muslims in Islam.

Several cost-effective and reasonable methods are used for casting off an evil eye. For example, a few pinches of white sugar wrapped in a piece of paper or newspaper held tightly in a fist, waved 7 times around the person from head to toe, and burnt on flame is the traditional way of doing it. Burning it on the flame until it turns into ashes is a crucial step to make sure that the nazar is completely gone and its effect is properly undone. In another quick and widely practiced method, red dry chillies are used in odd numbers. When in doubt, red chillies in odd numbers either three, five, or seven should be moved around the person 7 times from down to the upward direction. Oftentimes, salt is also mixed with chills and after completing the casting process, both salt and chillies are to be burnt in the fire. After being put on flame, it must cause a bout of cough which would indicate that the person is free of the evil eye. Red chillies are believed to have the ability to attract bad energy which is burnt and evil is cast off.

The methods of protecting loved ones from nazar may vary in every family but the purpose is essentially the same which is to achieve the well-being of the family. In another remedy, three small pieces of flammable cloth in any color available are taken to perform the act. Silk is not used because it does not burn easily. Each piece must have cuts in it. One piece with 3 cuts, one with five, and the other with seven cuts in it. All three pieces are moved around the person with Nazar one by one in ascending order of cuts and burned in the flame. After setting it on fire, the final stage of the process is the interpretation of the results which is significant to conclude. If an odor is produced while burning, it means the person is free of the nazar and if it does not produce an odor, it tells that the person is occupied by the nazar. The smell should come after burning as is necessary for a person to qualify as healthy and free of spirits. The process is repeated until the smell comes from the cloth, gar, or chillies depending on what is burned.

The use of odd numbers in the casting process is also interesting. Some households mentioned that they strictly follow the odd number rule. As odd numbers are not considered good and are associated with bad energies, they are burnt to get rid of them. It has a connection with the severity of the distress also for example, in the case of mild symptoms such as headache, nausea, and numbness; three are used whereas, with the increased level of severity such as heaviness of the body, sweating, and fainting, the number goes high.

The belief that the evil eye brings misfortune is not just restricted to the older generation which is often easily assumed. It takes place in the digital world as well. People exchange online texts of compliments such as wishing good luck or success with the symbol of the blue eye which is an icon for shielding from bad evils. The blue eye sign as an amulet is believed to be originated in the times of Mesopotamian civilization. According to the common belief, blue acts as a protective shield from negative energy or compliments in disguise. It is sometimes worn in a locket or bracelet or placed at homes as an eye charm which saves from unexpected external harm (Hargitai, 2018). Furthermore, stones (turquoise, ruby, and emerald) are also worn for a similar purpose which is to keep bad luck away and bring fortune and prosperity through stone energies.

The nazar is not only associated with people but anything that a person holds dear such as property, cars, livestock, and any other tangible and intangible assets. For example, cars are often protected by hanging a piece of cloth or a shoe at the back side as a black mark or "*kala teeka*" to keep the evil eyes off. Trucks and cars with black cloth hanging on

them can be easily found on roads in Pakistan. For detoxing the house, an herbal remedy is thought to be useful. For example, herbs named harmal and lubaan are placed on a slow flame until smoke is released. The smoke and scent of the herbs are diffused in a way it reaches every corner of the house. In local terminology, it is called dhooni which purifies the air from negative energies.

THE SYMBOLIC POWER OF THE EVIL EYE

According to Geertz, symbols shape and reflect the worldview of a culture. The evil eye, as a powerful symbol, encapsulates a range of meanings related to envy, protection, and well-being. It operates within a symbolic system that includes amulets, rituals, and linguistic expressions, all of which work together to influence behavior and maintain social well-being (Geertz, 1973).

The evil eye's symbolic power lies in its ability to externalize internal psychological states, such as envy and fear, and address them through culturally sanctioned practices. These practices serve to manage social relationships and mitigate potential conflicts arising from envy. By attributing misfortune to an external, malevolent force, individuals and communities can navigate their experiences of suffering and seek remedies that are culturally and socially acceptable.

PROMOTING WELL-BEING THROUGH SYMBOLIC ENACTMENT

The enactment of the evil eye as a strange power for well-being involves a complex interplay of beliefs, practices, and social interactions. Protective measures and rituals not only address the perceived threat of the evil eye but also promote psychological and social well-being. They provide individuals with a sense of control and agency in the face of uncertainty and adversity. For example, a mother who is away from her son but worries about his well-being ties a black amulet on his arm so that he can stay safe is a classic example of how that amulet is taken as a power tool which can fight with the evil spirits to protect her son.

These practices also reinforce social norms and values, such as the importance of community support, the power of collective rituals, and the significance of protecting oneself and others from harm. In this way,

the evil eye functions as a cultural mechanism for maintaining social harmony and individual health.

CONCLUSION

The cultural enactment of the evil eye, through its symbolic and ritualistic dimensions, serves as a powerful tool for promoting well-being within Pakistani society. Applying Clifford Geertz's interpretive approach to culture, we see that the evil eye is not merely a superstition but a deeply embedded symbol that influences social behavior and psychological states. By examining the evil eye within its cultural context, we gain a deeper understanding of how symbols function to shape human experiences and promote communal well-being. This analysis underscores the importance of symbols in the construction of cultural reality and the maintenance of harmony, well-being, and social order.

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This paper is solely written by Nimra Arooj (me) and no other author is involved.

CONFLICTS OF INTERESTS

There are no conflicts of interest.

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