



Belief in the Evil Eye and Early Childcare in Rural Punjab, Pakistan

The belief in the evil eye is associated with feelings of envy that brings harm to children. In Punjabi Muslim culture the evil eye is a threat to a child's health before and after birth. This article investigates the "evil eye" belief and protective measures adopted by Punjabis to refract it. The study was conducted in a Pakistani Punjabi village. Findings reveal a dominant magico-religious approach, along with gradually diminishing folk remedies.

KEYWORDS: folk religion—evil eye—magic—magico-religious healing—Pakistan—Punjab

THE BELIEF in the evil eye is based upon the idea that a male or female individual can voluntarily or involuntarily bring harm to another person, animal, or property simply by looking at the object in question or praising it. This harm may be a recoverable loss or a huge disaster. The fear of the evil eye has led people to practice several folk and religious protective measures (DUNDES 1992). The belief in the evil eye is associated with feelings of envy that bring harm to children, especially in early childhood (SCHOECK 1992). That the evil eye belief is a universal phenomenon is quite evident from several studies conducted in different parts of the world. Such studies describe the evil eye as a primary cause of sickness and misfortune. In addition to many other folk healing traditions, common healing methods include the use of natural objects, amulets, plants, and incantations (see ABU-RABIA 2005; APOSTOLIDES and DREYER 2009; DANIELS and STEVANS 2003; DONALDSON 1992; DUNWICH 2002; ELIAS 1999; ELWORTHY 1895; FRANKLIN 2005; HAND 1992; HARFOUCHE 1992; LEFEBER and VOORHOEVE 1998; LYKIARDOPOULOS 1981; MURGOCI 1992; PATTERSON and AGHAYEVA 2000; POTTS 1982; RANSEL 2000; SMITH 1996; WEBSTER 2010). The common assumptions about this belief in the cultures for which we have case studies is the vulnerability that certain socially valuable objects possess. The protective and curative methods used to ward off the evil eye depend on religious affiliation and specific cultural contexts. Children often are seen as among the most vulnerable human beings, which is why they are more prone to be victims of the evil eye.

The evil eye belief is a religiously and socially established aspect of Muslim Punjabi culture. It can affect crops, domestic animals, and children, as mentioned above, since all of them possess significant social and economic value. The fear of the evil eye stems from a sense of insecurity of envious human beings and *jinnat* (supernatural beings) that may bring harm to the valued items. Fearing the envious glance, people seek protection against its power through a variety of religious and folk measures.

This article is part of my research on infant care belief practices in rural Punjab, Pakistan. During my research, I found the evil eye belief to be a very common threat to a child's physical well-being. I investigated the evil eye belief and related childcare practices of numerous Punjabi parents. The data set presented in this article is part of the findings taken from a six-month period of intermittent field-

work that I conducted in a village located in south Punjab during the years 2010–2013. In this article, I will explore the prominent presence of the evil eye belief and its relation to early childcare culture in the rural areas of Pakistani Punjab. The study presents parents' perceptions about the evil eye and explains the traditional protective and curative system in the Punjabi childcare context.

CULTURAL BACKGROUND

Punjab is a vast ethnolinguistic territory located in the north of the Indian subcontinent; it was divided between India and Pakistan in 1947. Historically, Punjabi Muslims lived side by side with Hindu and Sikh communities for centuries, where they spoke a common language, ate similar food, and wore similar clothing. Their coexistence lasted until 1947, when the partition of the Indian subcontinent occurred, forming the two independent nations of India and Pakistan. Living together within the context of Hindu-Muslim religious tension dominated largely by a prevailing Indian cultural identity created a society characterized by a complex blend of cultural and religious traditions borrowed from more than one religious tradition. Pakistani Muslims, however, with their religious belief practices, can be distinguished from other religious groups in neighboring India (SHARMA 2004), despite the fact that there has been considerable overlap in the past. Because Islam is a “foreign” religion in the Indian context, the majority of Muslims in the Indian subcontinent are primarily converts from Hinduism. Hence, a cultural similarity of folk beliefs, practices, and customs exists that transcends religious distinctions (KARIM 1956; LEVY 1957), which has resulted in a mixing of mainstream and so-called “folk” (*lok*) religion (YODER 1974), including such things as belief in certain magical systems, ecstatic rituals, the veneration of saints and visitation to their shrines, the use of amulets, and sometimes even the incorporation of animistic beliefs. More recently, some scholars have resorted to using the term “vernacular” to replace “folk” (for example, PRIMIANO 1995), arguing that the latter is outdated. However, I shall continue to use the term “folk” here, since it is a well-established term in the anthropological discourse concerning Pakistan (for example, see ASANI 1988; EWING 1984). Whatever one calls it, such mixing helped in sustaining minority Muslim societies in Hindu India during the centuries before the Partition of 1947 (BLUNT 1931).

The study was conducted to explore beliefs and practices associated with early childcare among a rural population of Punjabi Muslims living in a village situated adjacent to the southern Punjabi city known as Fortabas. Rural Punjab is green, fertile, and rich in its agricultural production (such as the cash crops of wheat, rice, cotton). Punjabis live in an extended and male-dominated family system that makes Punjabi society a patriarchal one with noticeably marked gender boundaries. A traditional Punjabi family, for example, extends to grandparents, uncles, aunts, and their children. The father is the family head and the decision-making authority in important matters related to the family's economy and the future of the children in the household (for example, marriage, education, and so on). The mother, however,

is the primary caregiver and bears the reproductive and childcare responsibilities. Children are valued members of the family, so a child is the foremost desire of any newly married couple and their respective families. A childless couple often seeks the blessing of a birth through religious and spiritual means by visiting charismatic healers who are recognized as such by the majority of people in any given community. Healthy pregnancy, safe birth, and the well-being of the child during infancy are important matters that responsible families address. Health seeking beliefs and practices are therefore common to ensure the physical well-being of children.

People express sincere joy, especially at the birth of a boy, for they celebrate male birth with great delight. However, if the child is a girl, the family shows very little celebratory rejoicing. The son is a symbol of the family's lineage and an inheritor and successor of his father. Parents look after their daughter in a custodial fashion, but realize that she will leave her natal family after marriage when she becomes a member of her husband's extended family. Thus, people do not like to have too many daughters because of the enormous expenses associated with the dowry tradition (that is, giving money, clothes, furniture, and even cattle to the daughter at her wedding) and the fear that inherited property will follow to the other family along with the bride.

THE VILLAGE

Fort Abbas is a historical *tehsil* (administrative unit) with an area of 2,536 square kilometres located in the district of Bahawlnagar. It was known as Pholra until 1927, when the Nawab of the region renamed it after his son, Muhammad Abbas. Fortabas, as it is now commonly known, is famous for Cholistan, its surrounding desert and the largely uncultivated land that remains so due to lack of water. Agriculture is, as already mentioned above, the major economic activity. The summers are very hot, reaching a maximum of 49 to 52 degrees Centigrade (TEHSIL MUNICIPAL ADMINISTRATION 2014).

As recorded in the Census of 1998, the population numbered 285,596 individuals, with 147,371 males and 138,225 females. The average household size at the time was 6.9. Currently, the total population is estimated to be 366,000, with nearly 87 percent of the population being located in the urban environs around the city (BUREAU OF DEVELOPMENT STATISTICS 2013). As per the 1998 Census, the literacy rate of the entire district in which the *tehsil* is located was 35.1 percent, with 45.5 percent male literacy and 23.78 percent female literacy. Official records indicate that there is only one public hospital with sixty beds. There are also eight dispensaries and fourteen basic health care units in Fortabas, which suggests that the majority of villages in the *tehsil* where I worked is deprived of basic health-related services. Overall southern Punjab is considered by many agencies to be a neglected area that has not been given enough attention by the provincial government. However, a political awareness among the public and among local politicians is now growing.

Within the *tehsil* of Fortabas, there are a number of villages and urban/suburban areas adjacent to the city. The village under study is situated approximately sixty

kilometres from the Fortabas city center. As such, it presents a general cultural picture of the typical southern Punjabi village described above. With nearly two hundred households and a population of approximately 1,800, farming and other sorts of manual or day labor are the primary professions in the village. Fortabas' peasants thus rely on agriculture for their daily sustenance. Like most Punjabi villages located in largely inaccessible areas, Fortabas provides unsatisfactory health and education opportunities. The village has one basic health unit where villagers can receive minimal healthcare, along with commonly used modern medicine, such as Disprin or Paracetamol. There is one primary school for girls and one primary school for boys. People live in houses of mixed mud and brick construction, usually having wide-open courtyards where they have sufficient sunlight and fresh air. In cold weather, coughs and influenza are common, and in summer diarrhea is a problem. Along with the limited choices of modern medicine available, people normally seek out folk remedies.

Farming and manual labor are the primary professions, but young boys who have some formal or technical education in occupations such as an electrician try to find jobs in surrounding towns and cities. A majority of the villagers where I conducted my research belong to the Arayin (*ārāyīn*) clan. This clan is a major Muslim agricultural caste, being the largest farming community in Pakistan (JAF-FRELOT and BEAUMONT 2004). Parents arrange marriages for their children within the same caste, preferably extended family relatives, since the population is overall quite conservative when it comes to customary practices such as arranged marriage. In the past, all the family members would live together with combined economic activities and shared resources. With the passage of time, however, it is now rare to see such extended families living under one roof. This is due to several factors: the scarcity of resources, interest in economic activities other than agriculture, and displacement to other urban or semi-urban areas. Regardless, people remain deeply connected to their relatives. On the occasions of marriage or death ceremonies, for example, families gather together and share their material resources to help each other out.

RESEARCH APPROACH

Native familiarity with a given context is valued in anthropological research by some theorists, for it allows for new and challenging cultural interpretations sometimes overlooked by foreign investigators (GULLESTAD 1992). In the wider Punjabi Muslim context, I am a native. However, as I was born and brought up in a large city located in central Punjab, the local population perceives me to be an outsider, despite the fact that I speak the same language and practice the same religion. When narrowed down to a southern Punjabi village context, I am a non-native. My status as a fellow Punjabi, albeit an urban one, helped me to overcome dialectal and cultural barriers in the end. It also made adaptation to the harsh rural living conditions among the villagers for the purpose of doing ethnographic research easier to bear. My “nonnative” position as a researcher with knowledge

and skills earned throughout my academic and research career helped me to bracket many “native” presumptions. I therefore felt confident in my position as a participant observer who was, in a sense, both inside and outside of the tradition being investigated. To study early childcare beliefs and customs, I used participant observation and in-depth interviews as my primary research methods. Engaging in daily conversation as an informal approach to gathering oral data as well as taking extensive field notes helped me to compile the raw data needed in order arrive at a contextual understanding based on critical empathy. To study beliefs associated with the evil eye, I interviewed parents between the ages of twenty-five to thirty-five as well as a religious healer. The religious healer I interviewed was the forty-plus-year old *imām* (prayer leader and religious specialist) who resided in the local mosque. In order to accommodate gender boundaries for comfortable access to females, keeping in mind the contextual sensitivity and social sanctions concerning male and female mixed company, I brought along my wife as a research assistant. She happens to be an educator as well, so her presence provided me access to certain situations and events that I might have otherwise missed. Having her along assisted me in mixing easily with villagers who practiced gender segregation. Her presence also strengthened the trust relationship between the two researchers and the rural participants who served as consultants in my study by providing vital data. In addition, native linguistic fluency allowed me to understand the nuances of local communication without having to rely on a translator to decode the information received. The experience was thus largely dialogical in nature. The entire duration of my fieldwork included two months of preliminary fieldwork in 2010–2011, with three more months of fieldwork later in 2011, then a one-month follow-up trip in 2013. I found the evil eye belief to be prominent, something that everybody knows and, to an extent, fears. Personal observations followed by extended discussions uncovered beliefs associated with the evil eye, and interviews with the religious healer and parents of the village’s children disclosed a set of perceptions about the evil eye and concurrent protective and curative measures taken in the region.

NAZAR LAGNĀ: INFLICTING THE EVIL EYE IN RURAL PUNJAB

bace nun nazar lag gayī

The child has been inflicted by the evil eye

Nazar lagnā (to apply [the] gaze) is both an Urdu and Punjabi phrase used verbally for the infliction of the evil eye. *Nazar lagnā* describes the release of a devastating power through the eyes that is initiated by feelings of envy. Punjabi parents perceive the evil eye as an envious gaze of a human being or a *jinn* (one class of supernatural beings) that is harmful in a variety of ways. The belief in the evil eye is seen in connection with the malignant power of envy stored in the eye of the beholder. An object worthy of being seen (that is, fortune) may excite envy and might be ill wished through a fatal envious gaze (ELWORTHY 1895). “Potentially

everyone under the influence of anger or envy can be capable of casting the malicious glance,” writes LYKIARDOPOULOS (1981, 223). In Arab-Muslim culture, envy is a shameful feeling deeply rooted in the heart of the envious person (ABU-RABIA 2005; MACPHEE 2003). Likewise, in Punjabi Muslim culture, envy is a “disease of the heart” (*dil rog*) that brings harm to other persons. One reason why the evil eye is a more common fear than witchcraft or magic is its presence in everybody’s eyes (that is, anyone who has the capacity to gaze), and whose passing sensation of envy may trigger it. The intensity of this negative feeling and the significant value attached to fertile women and children in Punjabi society exposes them to the threat of the evil eye. As mentioned, pregnancy is seen as a great blessing, whereas childlessness leaves the woman dejected and disappointed. Women seek protection against the evil eye to protect the fetus, and then the newly born baby. Generally, the people with whom I spoke could not identify an evil eye possessor, but they all suspected that it was from someone deprived and envious, such as a childless woman. The following interviews describe parents’ fears of the evil eye during pregnancy and after birth, and the folk and religious healing practices employed to alleviate it should the evil eye be cast. The three interview scenarios presented below then used in my analysis will be referred as I, II, and III respectively throughout the remainder of this article.

SCENARIO I

The first scenario is the case of Razia. Razia is the mother of three children. The third child is a two-month old baby boy. When Razia was pregnant, she had a useful conversation with my research assistant. Razia discussed the risk of the evil eye, especially from a childless woman. During her pregnancy, besides reciting Quranic prayers, she avoided childless women. She eventually gave birth to a baby boy, a precious pleasure after having had two daughters. I congratulated the father on my second visit while looking at the cute baby boy wearing new clothing and an amulet around his neck. “*Māsha’ allāh* (an expression of praise or thankfulness [lit. God has willed it])! A pretty and active baby!” I said, expressing my admiration for the infant. Parents feel secure if a visitor expresses his or her admiration by using religious exclamations, such as the one I employed. After some discussion, I started talking about the baby and asked about his amulet.

Father: Yes. This is a protection against the evil eye. The *imām* wrote this amulet from the Quran on a piece of paper and advised us to wrap it in a neat cloth or better in a piece of leather to keep it safe.

Researcher: How long will the baby have to wear it?

Father: Well! This is an evil eye amulet. He can wear it for life if it is not damaged.

Mother: Our children, who can recite the Quran, they learned certain verses that protect against the evil eye by heart and recite them before going to bed at night. It also helps them from having nightmares.

SCENARIO II

Mussarat's baby son was continuously crying and not taking food. After some time, as he was lying on the bed and playing, a couple of women visited the mother and baby. It might be the evil eye, they speculated. "Go to the mosque and ask the *maulvī* (religious or legal scholar) to come and recite an incantation," the mother asked her elder son. She kept swaying the cradle to make the baby comfortable. Mussarat asked Shaista (her sister-in-law) to bring seven red chillies. Shaista, knowing what to do, came with seven red chillies in her right hand. She waved them around the baby seven times and threw them in the stove. "Chillies are burning with a crackling sound without an itchy smell, so the child is affected with the evil eye," she said. I then had a chance to ask the obvious question about the ritual remedy: "Why seven red chillies, and how do you know that they work?"

Shaista: This is common and it works. Red chillies are [naturally] supposed to burn with a strong smell, but they did not.

Researcher: So this is how you diagnose the effect of the evil eye?

Mussarat (trying to explain): Yes, it is a *ṭaunā* (folk remedy) to diagnose the evil eye, and it also wards off the evil eye's effects.

Researcher: And you asked for *maulvī sāb*?

Mussarat: The *maulvī* will recite *dam* (incantation [lit. breath]). It is always good to protect the child with *dam* and *ta'vīz* (an amulet with a written verse inside of it).

Meanwhile, the *maulvī sāb* came, recited an incantation (*dam*), after which he blew toward the baby three times.

Imām: If God wills, he will be fine soon. Where is his evil eye amulet that I gave you? You should not take off the amulet.

Taking advantage of this meeting, I asked the *imām* about the red chillies and their magical properties.

Imām: There are many "folk" (*laukik*) methods [collectively known as *ṭaunā*] that have prevailed in our culture for years. Regardless of religion, people used to adopt these methods. However, the best and only Islamic way is the Quran and prayers.

SCENARIO III

Ayesha is a fourteen-year-old school student who lives in a city with her parents near the village. Her grandparents and other relatives live in the village where I conducted my research. Ayesha's father has a shop in the city, so he moved there with his family.

Ayesha: In my childhood, I was a healthy child with a fair complexion (a mark of beauty). My parents, especially my mother, and grandmother, always feared the

risk of the evil eye. They thought that I was repeatedly exposed to the evil eye. My mother and grandmother used to blow on me while reciting Quranic verses (that is, as an incantation). I also had a black thread tied around my neck that my father had brought from some [Sufi] shrine. I think the thread was blessed for protection.

Researcher: Did he also fear the evil eye?

Ayesha: Yes, but he prefers Islamic ways for protection and cure. Once on a visit to my uncle's village, I got sick suddenly and he thought it was due to the evil eye. My uncle and father went to a religious healer in that village who wrote a *ta'vīz* on paper. My father soaked that *ta'vīz* in a cup of water (as per the advice of the healer). I drank that water.

Researcher: How did the evil eye strike you?

Ayesha: My father said that someone had stared at me because of my fair complexion and radiant face.

PLEASURES AND FEARS

The above three interviews suggest the importance of children in Punjabi culture. The presence of children provide for both pleasurable occasions and fearful ones simultaneously for adult family members. Infants and young children are vulnerable, so they are always in the watchful care of the adults of the household. As vulnerable and valuable beings they are constantly under threat of being exposed to the evil eye. But this is a risk that every young couple must face as they set out on life's journey together to raise a family. Pregnancy, as we have seen, followed by the birth of the first child, then possibly the birth of a baby boy, are the most pleasurable events in the married couple's lives.

In Punjabi society, pregnancy is seen as a blessing for a woman in two ways. First, the religious status of a mother ranks her above the baby's father. Second, the social status of a married woman becomes greater with the birth of a child. Razia (1) discussed her feelings during her pregnancy. At the time of her first pregnancy, she was pleased about her fertility and wished for a baby son. However, she had two daughters one after the other. Although the family showed some concerns at the birth of the second daughter, they were happy for the mother's reproductive health, expecting a baby son in the future. Safe and fruitful pregnancy helps a woman gain the desired status of a mother, with expectations of further maturation and growth. According to a famous Punjabi saying, "A carrot looks beautiful with leaves" meaning, a woman is complete once she has children. Razia, having had two daughters, was certainly not childless, infertile, or barren. Her happiness and excitement was natural, but at the same time, she was afraid of the childless women in her village who, in their disappointment, were potentially dangerous in terms of her pregnancy. Their envious selves could have cast the evil eye on her, resulting in a miscarriage or the birth of an unhealthy or abnormal child.

Ultimately, with both pleasure and fear, seeking spiritual protection and avoiding contact with the childless women, Razia successfully gave birth to a son.

Salma, another mother, was afraid of the evil eye during her pregnancy. Besides avoiding childless women, she tried not to disclose her pregnancy to people as long as she could avoid it. Hiding the news of a pregnancy initially minimizes the risk of the evil eye. Living in an extended family, she feels secure with her relatives around her, including her husband, parents, and in-laws. At the same time, she feels insecure due to the women in her family or those in the neighborhood who are childless and may be envious of her. Pregnant mothers thus find themselves in the uncomfortable predicament of having to avoid meeting childless women. In addition to other protective measures, they cover their bodies to hide their physical state to every extent possible.

Ayesha was the first child in her family. Therefore, everyone in the family was especially concerned about her health. A healthy body and her much sought after fair complexion further made her vulnerable to the evil eye. When she became afflicted, her parents and family members adopted various religious remedies. Her mother and grandmother would recite Quranic prayers, while her father brought a blessed black thread for her. When she was sick, she drank *ta'viz*-soaked water. Their firm belief in religious healing helped them to manage the chaotic threat of the evil eye.

PROTECTION AND CURE

The emphasis on religious healing is common in the above three cases. As people perceive the evil eye to be a direct influence of the envious gaze, the popular cure is usually some form of religious/spiritual healing, such as those described above that involve incantations and the wearing of protection against the sinister force. Pakistani Punjabis are primarily Sunni Muslims who follow religious teachers or spiritual leaders (*p̄r* or *murshid*). Islamic sources of knowledge establish belief in the evil eye as a reality that brings harm due to the envious and jealous intentions of some human beings against other fellow beings (IBN KATHIR 2003). In this connection medieval Islamic authors have contributed much to explaining the Islamic perspective on the evil eye. Their accounts are also full of recommended healing and protective traditions (ABU-RABIA 2005). People visit *imāms* and spiritual leaders for religious protection and healing. Religious healers mostly use amulets and incantations as healing devices, as I have described above. Other folk remedies such as those employed by Shaista (II) are also common. Religious protection and cure, however, is seen as the most definite method to rid an individual of the evil eye. Ideally, one uses amulets and incantations in advance as well, so as to avoid the infliction in the first place. Prevention is thus preferable to prescription.

Razia (I) and Mussarat (II), being careful mothers, both looked for protection soon after the birth of their babies. Both families received an evil eye amulet from the local *imām*. Mussarat forgot to place the evil eye amulet on her child, espe-

cially in the presence of visitors. As a result, her baby was affected with the evil eye. Shaista (II) tried a folk remedy (that is, waving and burning the red chillies) that first diagnosed the evil eye then cured the baby. This *ṭaunnā* is a form of folk medicine that first identifies the cause of the illness and then cures it. However, religious healing was ultimately necessary, as Mussarat mentioned. That is why the parents then contacted the religious specialists. The *imām* recited Quranic incantations and strictly advised the parents not to take off the protective amulet.

Punjabi people in Pakistan recognize folk remedies as *ṭaunnā*, a sort of secular magical practice, but do not relate them with their religion. Shaista (II) thinks *ṭaunnā* is common and effective; that is why she practiced it. The *imām* discussed these methods that have been in practice for years with me. According to him, such practices are performed regardless of religion affiliation. Hence, respondents clearly distinguished between folk remedies such as *ṭaunnā* and religious healing. Custom and religiously sanctioned practices thus work hand in hand as ways of dealing with the evil eye complex.

THE EVIL EYE: CAUSE AND EFFECT

Punjabi parents believe that deprivation and wistfulness can cause a person to cast the evil eye, intentionally or unintentionally. Sometimes the beauty or value of the child attracts envious eyes. Shaista and Musarrat (II) diagnosed the evil eye and suspected that “unprotected” verbal or nonverbal admiration to be a cause of the evil eye. In some cases, the social status of a person indicates him or her as envious and wistful, potentially dangerous, and prone to inflicting the evil eye. The level of wistfulness and envy depends on the victim’s status and well-being. For example, Razia and Salma were afraid of childless women because they thought them envious due to their childlessness. Pregnancies make a significant difference in women’s lives, as we have seen, and raise their status to that of fertile women. This elevation in status is enough to cause a feeling of disappointment in childless women sharing the same sociocultural environment.

Similarly, although not as unfortunate as the childless woman, a woman deprived of male children can be envious of a woman giving birth to a baby boy. Sajida, a mother of four who gave birth to a baby son after three daughters, thus had to be careful of childless women in general, but especially those who were not yet blessed with a son. Consider the following exchange between us.

Sajida: I am careful about it. Women from the family and neighborhood visit me to see my baby [because it is the only son after three daughters]. My baby is protected with an amulet, but when a woman having only daughters visits us, I feel afraid of the evil eye.

Researcher: Do you think they have some envious intentions toward you and your son?

Sajida: Deprivation may create an envious feeling, especially from the woman who does not like my family or me.

Sajida's feeling on the birth of a baby boy is a blend of pleasure as the mother of a son in a patriarchal family system. At the same time, she suffers the fear of mysterious harms that may come from deprived members even within her own extended family. The evil eye depends on the social positioning of the envious ones, and it is based on the level of their deprivation and wistfulness. Unlike cultures where the evil eye is attributed to strangers (DANIELS and STEVANS 2003; FADLALLA 2004; SMITH 1996), in rural Punjab, familiar people who may be envious for some reason or another are even more dangerous than strangers. BARTH (1961) described the evil eye belief among the Persian nomadic tribes, which is thought to reside in all people, though there may be a difference in the strength of harm that an individual can assert. The Persian nomads also believe in the unconscious envy that brings harm, and consequently the evil eye of a declared enemy cannot be effective. Similar to Barth's findings, Punjabis also believe that people who are welcomed as familiar, such as friends, neighbors, or relatives, may cast the evil eye. However, these people can have conscious or unconscious envy and can cast the evil eye in both directions. For example, Razia (I) was afraid of the "conscious" envy of a childless woman. The childless woman she encountered was not a declared enemy at all, but her deprivation made her a potential evil eye possessor for young children and pregnant women. On the other hand, Mussarat's child (II) was inflicted with the evil eye of "unconscious" envy. This unconscious envy is not distinct like the conscious envy where a deprived person has reason to be envious. Yet, envy is there when a silent or loud praise for something or someone is not protected with verbal blessings or best wishes, such as saying *māsha' allāh* to exclaim joy over the child while also protecting it by invoking the name of God.

THE CHILD AS A VULNERABLE VICTIM

As already described, children are a valued commodity in the Punjabi kinship system. As such, they are constantly vulnerable victims of the evil eye. Besides physical weakness and dependability, this vulnerability depends on the relative value of the child in the family, which is gendered in nature. For example, a baby boy is more vulnerable than a baby girl is. A first baby born after many years and the only son after a few daughters would, for example, be more exposed to the evil eye. In addition, the beauty of a child attracts envious eyes, thereby increasing the risk of evil eye affliction.

One day I was invited to lunch with Arshad's family. Arshad's daughter Nusrat was also there with her only son, one-year-old Shabir Hussain. Shabir Hussain has the desired fair complexion, and is a healthy baby with prominent facial features. While I was there, Nusrat's friends from the neighborhood visited her. They took the child in their lap and started talking with him. One of them said the following:

Māsha' allāh, his complexion is like the mother.... [fondling the baby] ...

May God keep the evil eye away.

"Do people here like fair complexion?" I asked.

“Yes, a fair complexion looks more beautiful than dark ones,” Nusrat said.

“For a mother every child is beautiful, whatever complexion he or she has,” Nusrat’s mother said.

It is usual that friends and relatives visit the home of a newly born baby. His or her complexion, eyes, nose, and family resemblances are all exciting details that visitors, especially women, express to their hosts. A fair complexioned baby with an uplifted nose, big black or blue eyes, and a healthy-looking face is perceived to be an object of perfect beauty. Nusrat’s friend was praising the baby for its fair complexion, again invoking the protective religious phrase, *māshā’ allāh*. Ayesha (III) was a beautiful baby in her childhood, and her grandmother was often afraid of the evil eye.

THE EVIL EYE EFFECTS BEFORE AND AFTER BIRTH

During pregnancy and after birth mothers are said to be easy victims of the evil eye. The harmful effects are virtually similar in all cultures, as we have already seen (AYERS 2003; DANIELS and STEVANS 2003; FRANKLIN 2005; HARFOUCHE 1992; MURGOCI 1992). In fact, the evil eye can even bring harm to the baby while it is still in the womb. That harm may result in a miscarriage at worst, or a disabled, weak, or abnormal baby at best. Razia (I), who was worried about the evil eye during her pregnancy, spoke about the risk of the evil eye in the following manner

Usually mothers take care during pregnancy and protect themselves with amulets and prayers. I know Najma (a mother in the same village), she gave birth to a baby boy, and he is mentally not fit. She was not careful during pregnancy and got inflicted with the evil eye.

According to the respondents, due to the care and protection against the evil eye during pregnancy, just a few cases resulted in miscarriage. Also, only a few cases of disabled babies being born were reported. During pregnancy, the only source of medical care and awareness is the traditional midwife (*dāī*) and elderly women in the family. Family members trust the wisdom of the elders and the traditional skills possessed by the midwife. When miscarriage occurs, or the birth of a disabled or stillborn child, people believe that the event happened as a result of evil eye or witchcraft.

If things go well during pregnancy and the mother gives birth to a normal baby, breast-feeding is the first need of the infant. The evil eye can affect the baby in two ways; first, a breast-feeding mother may have insufficient or unhealthy breast milk; second, a baby may frequently refuse to feed. As public breast-feeding is not a common practice, informants did not report a mother with insufficient milk as a result of the evil eye. Instead, grandmothers and elderly women think that young mothers are not healthy enough to have sufficient milk as compared to the older generation. However, while bottle-feeding, the bottle is wrapped in a cloth. The

quantity of milk the baby drinks may attract the evil eye and the baby may refuse the feed.

Other effects the evil eye can inflict upon the baby are diseases. Fever, stomach pain, eye infections, and diarrhoea are all examples of diseases reported to me as being caused by the evil eye. The sudden occurrence of a disease normally indicates the evil eye effect. People believe that no medicine can cure the baby unless they ward off the evil eye first. Along with folk or modern medicine, people therefore practice healing traditions to prevent or cure the evil eye.

As I have been arguing, Punjabi parents explicitly differentiate healing and protective traditions that are either religious or customary. In other words, they do not link folk measures (*ṭaunnā*) to Islam, nor do they attach religious sentiments to the practices of traditional curing. The symbolism found in such folk traditions, however, carries subtle religious connotations. I will now turn to an analysis of Punjabi healing traditions as religious and folk measures for dealing with evil eye affliction.

RELIGIOUS HEALING TRADITIONS

Usually *imāms* work as religious healers and strongly recommend the evil eye amulet. Popular religious methods already mentioned are a variety of amulets or *ta'vīz* and *dam*, the practice of reciting sacred verses ending with blowing air on the afflicted child. Religious healers use different objects from nature and invoke divine powers through the invocation of religious texts. How does the religious healing work? An interview with a healer explains the logic as follows.

Religious healer: Parents bring their baby or I visit them. First, I recite a *dam*. There are verses from the Quran that the Holy Prophet especially advised for healing the effects of the evil eye. I blow toward the patient every time I finish reciting a verse (generally three times). I recite *dam* on water to be consumed.

Researcher: How do you know that the patient is affected with the evil eye?

Healer: When parents tell me about a sudden sickness of the baby or when the baby cries too much, refusing to feed. This is mostly the evil eye effect.

Researcher: What protections do you suggest to the parents?

Healer: I write a *ta'vīz* from the Quran. The children who wear it, *inshā' allāh* (God willing), are always protected.

Researcher: Is there any difference in the healing powers that *dam* and *ta'vīz* can exercise?

Healer: Both work in the same way. Both are powerful against the evil eye. A *ta'vīz* you can wear all the time, a permanent protection.

Researcher: Can parents recite *dam* themselves?

Healer: Yes, they can if they are Quran literate and remember the verses. *Dam*

recited by a person who is offering prayers five times a day is effective. Parents usually bring their children to me or take incanted water for their children.

Researcher: A woman can recite *dam*?

Healer: Yes, if she is clean and can follow the other instructions I told you.

Researcher: And parents can write *ta'vīz* as well?

Healer: No, they cannot do that. Writing an amulet is not like reciting verses. *Ta'vīz* is not ordinary writing. One must know the meaning and effect of different Quranic words, alphabets, the symbols and numbers representing those words or verses. Only religious healers know how to write an amulet.

Dam is a recitation of Quranic verses famous for their healing powers and a shield against evil effects. There are certain prayers in the Quranic verses, such as *āyat ul-kursī* (throne verse, 2: 255) and the *al-mu'awwidhatayn* (refuge verses, 113 and 114) that are well known for their protective and healing powers against the evil eye. To recite a *dam*, a Muslim must be a regular performer of the obligatory prayers and should know how to read the Quran properly. He or she must be aware of the basic Islamic concepts of purity and cleanliness required to recite the Quran and offer prayers. Quranic education, virtuous character, seniority in age, and being a regular *namāzī* (one who prays five times a day) adds to a person's reputation as a religious healer. That is why parents go to an *imām* or *hāfiz* (a Muslim who memorizes the Quran by heart) for religious healing. Sometimes an elderly man in the village who is known for his virtuous character and Islamic knowledge recites an incantation when asked. So popular is the practice that the majority of the children in the village wear a *ta'vīz*. Religious healers use objects that the patient can drink, eat, or wear. They might use salt, water, thread, or an amulet. The healer writes verses from the Quran in Arabic or the Arabic *abjad* numerals of the verses or both in ink on white paper. Each Arabic letter has a numerical value known as *abjad* (syllabary; BENNETT 1998, 252), which provides the foundation for the Islamic form of numerology. Healers advise wrapping the *ta'vīz* in cloth, leather, or metal. It protects it from damage. Besides wearing it, the *ta'vīz* is soaked in water to drink. *Ta'vīz*-soaked or incanted water is used as a medicine (III). Water as an object of conceiving powers is common in many religious cultures, such as Christianity (REMINICK 1974; DANIELS and STEVANS 2003). Locally, it is perceived to be a cleansing agent, a purifier used to clean the body and the mind, while Muslims generally use water during the obligatory purification rituals (ablutions, baths, and prayers) as well.

Enchanted black threads with knots are also a form of *ta'vīz*. I met a young girl wearing a black thread with knots on her right wrist and a *ta'vīz* around her neck tied with black thread. Her father told me that he got the incanted thread and the evil eye amulet from his spiritual advisor or *pīr* to cure the sickness and stomach problems of the child. Pakistani Muslims refer to different black articles as sacred. For example, the black curtain covering the Ka'aba in Mecca and the black cornerstone (*al-hajar al-aswad*) located on the eastern side within it, as well as the black shawl

and black turban of the Prophet Muhammad, are all considered extraordinarily sacred. In this sense, black seems to be the color most often used to conceive of divine power against evil influences.

The value of the object used for healing depends on its culturally established features. For example, the concept of purity and cleanliness attached to an object makes it a cleansing agent to remove contamination. The concept of virtuousness distinguishes the object as sacred and acceptable for anti-evil divine powers. Incanted water, incanted threads, or amulets conceive powers from the Quranic words that are recited or written. The power of Quranic words conveys an important religious impression throughout the Islamic world. Some of the Quranic verses also indicate the healing powers of the Quran, as in the following two quotations.

And We sent down of the Quran that which is healing and mercy for the believers. (AL-HILALI and KHAN 1998, 17.82)

And when I am ill, it is He who cures me. (AL-HILALI and KHAN 1998, 26.80)

The religious healer acts as a figure of religious authority because of his knowledge of amulet writing. He does not claim the powers invested in the holy words or phrases but does claim the necessary knowledge of the Quran to write the words. Hence, with the power of his knowledge he is able to transfer supernatural healing power (a health blessing) to the objects. Once the Quranic incantation is performed on selected objects, they become devices that protect and cure. An amulet or a thread is seen as a “permanent protection” if it remains in contact with the body. Similarly incanted water becomes a medicine that cures the effects of the evil eye. “Physical contact” is an important aspect of religious healing and protection. Once the religious device (amulet, thread, or bracelet) is ready to work, it is brought in contact with the afflicted body. On the one hand, it resists the fatal power of the evil eye, and on the other, it cures the already effected body. In other words, the sanctified device transfers the “health blessing” to the body through contact. This magical action of the belief practice does not require a manipulation of supernatural powers; instead, the power of the words is used to request divine favors from God. The transfer of the divine blessing of health is an action where the healing belief practice works as a form similar to Frazerian contagious magic (FRAZER 1925) reinforced with religion, thus implying a magico-religious healing approach.

Another example of the power of Quranic words is the popular Islamic phrase, *māsha’ allāh*, as alluded to above. A loving gaze or exclamatory praise accompanied by certain words can protect one’s valuables (DUNDES 1992; ELWORTHY 1895). Saying *māsha’ allāh* is a cultural and religious virtue. *Māsha’ allāh* is one of those few Arabic phrases strategically used quite often in day-to-day communication. It is a part of a sociolinguistic culture influenced by Islam that cuts across linguistic boundaries, allowing the voicing of common sentiment across ethnic and

national borders. According to Migdadi and Momani, the evocation of the term is culturally significant in and of itself. They write the following:

Maašaallah (*māsha' allāh*) is a protective invocation that is used upon seeing or observing personally or socially valued things, such as wealth, beauty, offspring, and social achievements, so as to guard them from vanishing. Such use is derived from Arab-Islamic sociocultural norms about “the evil eye” and is related to its Quranic use as a marker of God’s will. (MIGDADI and MOMANI 2010, 485)

Parents like to hear this word from visitors while casting a first look at the child, as we saw in the first interview above (I). As it is believed to eliminate the risk of the evil eye, it is an important phrase in Muslim societies to develop an interpersonal relationship showing a desire to protect and respect other’s valued possessions (MIGDADI and MOMANI 2010).

FOLK HEALING TRADITIONS

With the expansion of Quranic learning, Punjabi people prefer religious protective and healing measures. However, folk traditions are still very much in practice. Culturally, women are primarily responsible for early childcare. The quick remedy they choose is a *ṭaunnā* advised by their mothers and grandmothers. There are many ways to do *ṭaunnā*, such as using plants, minerals, or other objects. The most practiced and popular *ṭaunnā* is to move specific natural objects (plants, minerals) around the affected baby in a circle seven times to destroy or remove the evil effects. As we saw earlier, Shaista (II) used chillies, one of the popular natural objects for *ṭaunnā*. FIGURE I describes the process of this folk remedy to ward off the evil eye.

The process involves selecting an object, holding it in the right hand, moving it around the victim seven times, and then destroying the object. The selection of the object depends on the ease of availability and family beliefs. Red chillies are

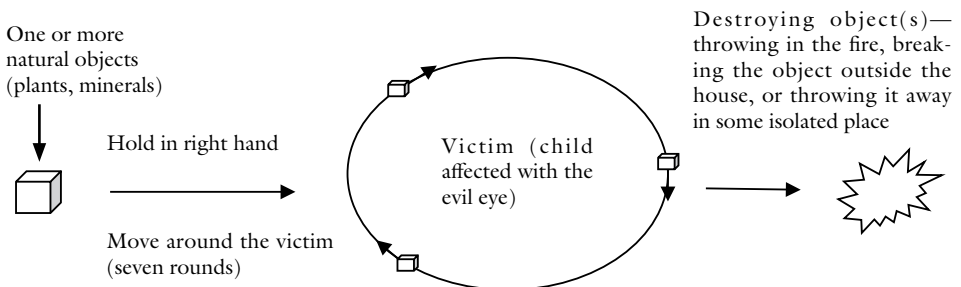


FIGURE I. Folk healing process to cure evil eye affliction.

popular in the Punjab. As we noticed in that example, the chillies were destroyed at the end of the rite in order to remove the evil from the presence of the victim.

Using the right hand is a desired and culturally appropriate act. In Muslim societies generally and Punjabi culture in particular, use of the right hand is mandatory for eating, drinking, giving and taking, as well as for greetings. Circular waving of the right hand holding the object around the patient is a common phenomenon in folk healing methods in the region. Encircling something means to cover the whole body. The circular motion of the object surrounds the patient and picks up the evil influences similar to the way a whirlwind works. If the child is under the effect of the evil eye, the object absorbs the “sickness evil.” In this sense, red chillies (11) thrown in the stove were not ordinary red chillies; instead, they contained the evil eye effects picked up from the sick body, which must be disposed of to bring about a cure. They burned with a crackling sound, and there was no strong scent. These signs seem to indicate the presence of the evil eye effect and the need to eradicate it. In this sense, chillies contain an innate diagnostic property. However, this is a remedial function of the *ṭaunnā* that also satisfies the sensory perceptions of the person practicing *ṭaunnā*. The belief is magical in the sense that certain objects, when used in a *ṭaunnā*, can remove evil effects. It is a layman’s magical belief practice, however, that does not require a magician’s expertise or any specific magical ritual settings. Simply by conforming to the traditional beliefs of the elders and having a sensory experience of the already “perceived” changes in the victim is proof to people that the threat or cause has been discovered and verified. Once the cause is detected, it does not remain unmanageable anymore.

The motion of the object in seven rounds is significant. The number seven is important in Hindu and Muslim religious beliefs and rituals, not only in South Asia but beyond as well. In Hinduism, for example, seven sacred cities (*saptapurī* [Ayodhya, Mathura, Haridwar, Varanasi, Ujjain, Dwarka, and Kanchipuram]) are traditionally regarded as pilgrimage destinations. There are also seven sacred rivers (the Ganges, the Yamuna, the Indus, the Godavari, the Sarasvati, the Narmada, and the Kavery). Moreover, during the “fire oath” wedding ritual, circumambulation of the fire pit seven times represents the seven promises to one another and the seven reincarnated lives spent together (FLOOD 1996; FARAH 2003). In Islam, during Hajj (pilgrimage to Mecca), numerous rituals are performed around the number seven, such as circling the Ka’aba seven times (*ṭawāf*); throwing seven small pebbles (*ramī al-jamrāt*) during the “stoning of the walls” ritual; and running seven times between Mount Safa and Marwah (FARAH 2003). The Quran relates the creation story in which God created seven heavens and seven earths (AL-HILALI and KHAN 1998, 65.11), and so on. Several other examples point to seven as an important number in Hindu and Islamic traditions (FLOOD 1996; FARAH 2003; POMEROY 2007), but the ones cited above should suffice for my purposes here. All these examples, in one way or the other, give a sense of perfection, completion, and precision. As belief in *ṭaunnā* does not require any specific religious affiliation, it is difficult to surmise if the number seven in *ṭaunnā* practice has any religious connotations or if it is just customary. Nevertheless, on the symbolic

level, the number seven indicates the complete treatment of the body, but the concept seems to be rooted in religious significance. Which came first, the custom or the ritual, is difficult to tell, as the Cambridge School pointed out long ago.

Destroying the object in the end completes the healing process. Shaista (II) threw the red chillies used into the fire and heard the crackling sound without the usual irritating smell (red chillies are spicy and give off a strong, irritating odor while burning). A perceived change in the chillies' properties, as has been established, suggests the evil eye effect, and afterward banishment of it. The powerful nature of the object inspires the healer to use it as a folk remedy in the first place.

CONCLUSION

In Punjabi society, children are important for the family lineage and for a secure future for parents. Besides being a biological relation and an emotional attachment, the socioeconomic value of children in a traditional and extended family system inspires parents to take care of their children with the greatest of care. Childcare in this context depends not only on the available health care resources but also on parental beliefs. The evil eye belief is so pervasive that parents seek religious and folk remedies against the influences of the evil eye. As they suspect the evil eye to be an unconscious or conscious envious look, people with a sense of deprivation are suspected as possessors of the evil eye due to their perceived deficiency of not having their own children. They thus have the ability to bring harm to the children of others because of jealousy or envy. Religion and culture shape parental health-seeking belief practices in that both traditional and ritual cures are sought out to alleviate the problem. Even if modern medical facilities are available, the ultimate satisfaction and confidence in the cure is achieved through the parent's beliefs. Having said this, it must also be pointed out that folk healing practices are gradually diminishing, for anything that local religious figures communicate as a religious tradition is perceived as more reliable and true. Parents prefer to contact religious healers, but at the same time some popular folk practices are still a part of their pluralistic healing approach. Similarly, religious healing is also fused with magical practice, giving way to magico-religious healing in context. This implies that magic in its secular form is a component of practical religion, particularly in practices my Punjabi consultants believed to be related to healing.

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