The Evil Eye and Cultural Beliefs among the Bedouin Tribes of the Negev, Middle East [1]

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The Evil Eye and Cultural Beliefs among the Bedouin Tribes of the Negev, Middle East [1]

Aref Abu-Rabia

Abstract

This paper examines Bedouin attitudes and practices relating to the evil eye as a cause of misfortune. The evil eye is perceived by the Bedouin as one of the most dangerous forces that can interfere in their lives, and they invest much energy in a variety of methods to counteract it. This paper seeks to contribute to a better understanding of the phenomenon by describing the rituals of diagnosis, treatment and prevention among the Bedouin tribes of the Negev in the Middle East.

The evil eye can bring a man to his grave, and a camel to the cooking pot (Arab-Bedouin saying).

The evil eye is like a light. You can see it, feel it, be affected by it, or affect others by means of it. It can cause harm or even death in large numbers, but you never succeed in holding it in your hands. This is the will of Allah (Bedouin saying).

Introduction

Belief in the evil eye is an important part of Bedouin folk culture from the cradle to the grave. It serves as a crucial mechanism to explain social problems, envy, bad luck and misfortune in the uncertain conditions of the desert environment. The belief in the evil eye is constantly present in people’s lives, alongside beliefs about spirits, jinns and other demons, and it has serious implications for how individuals perceive the world and their place in it.

The evil eye in Bedouin folk belief is tied to the fear of envy and jealousy in the eye of the beholder. It is said to be conveyed by a strange gaze, or by admiration without a blessing. The evil eye is said to cause impairment of sexual activity, impotence, sterility, disorders in menstruation, problems in pregnancy and childbirth, deficient breast milk, mastitis, a baby’s refusal to suckle, and so on.

It affects children, adults, livestock, and any kind of possession, and the most vulnerable are the very young, the wealthy and the beautiful. Characteristic symptoms of an attack of the evil eye are: drowsiness, slight yawns, drooping eyelids, listlessness, fatigue, weariness, lack of concentration, restlessness, discomfort, cramps, convulsions, headaches, hiccoughs and, among babies and young children, incessant crying and fretting.

The belief in the evil eye is embedded in the folklore of fallahin societies throughout the Middle East. The common Arabic name for the evil eye is ‘ayn’, and there are two types: that of humankind (insiya) and that of the jinns (jinniyah).

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and so on. The evil eye’s influence is usually counteracted by means of devices and practices intended to distract its attention and magically annul its power.

The Bedouin appear to have one set of folk beliefs (including the evil eye) in their culture, and another set of beliefs about Islam. From their viewpoint, there is no incompatibility between the two. Islamic tradition informs many of the protections and cures performed by traditional healers, who play a vital role in sustaining the evil eye beliefs by diagnosing and treating illnesses attributed to supernatural causes. This is also true of new “healers” currently offering Quran-based treatments. As this essay will show, Bedouin evil eye traditions remain vigorous even now, despite increasing urbanisation.

Fieldwork and Methods

Data for this paper are derived from a broader study of folk beliefs and folk medicine conducted between 1992 and 2002. All the material was recorded in field logs, and some was tape-recorded. Unstructured interviews and participant observation were carried out in the informants’ homes (both men and women), as well as in the residences of traditional healers (again both men and women). Most of the healers were over forty years of age, and all of them were married. All the informants were over twenty-five years of age.

It is usually difficult to gain more than a superficial knowledge of intimate life in other cultures, as anthropologists know. However, as I myself am a Bedouin from the Negev, and as I have maintained close personal ties with the tribes among whom I carried out fieldwork for my PhD thesis in 1983–5, informants felt relaxed and were generally glad to share information with me.

Today, around sixty per cent of the 140,000 Bedouin in the Negev live in seven towns, and most of the remaining forty per cent live in tribal settlements of varying sizes, in clusters of wooden or metal huts, tents, or in cement block or stone houses. The Bedouin population is divided into two main groups according to the type of settlement involved:

- Residents of the seven towns, established by the authorities: Rahat, Tel-Sheva [Tel al-Saba’], Kuseife [Ksifa], ‘Aro’er [‘Ar’ara], Segev Shalom [Shgib al-Salam], Hura and Laqiya.
- Residents of dispersed, unauthorised settlements who live in tribes outside the seven towns, in concentrations of varying size (Abu-Rabia 2002, 202–11).

The Social and Cultural Context

In recent years, the Bedouin in the Negev have undergone a massive and very rapid process of urbanisation. Their evacuation from their lands, largely against their will, and their hurried settlement in towns has had a profound social impact. In these towns, the Bedouin experience difficulties in social and economic adjustment, and in maintaining internal cohesion, resulting in hitherto unknown socio-economic problems of poverty, unemployment, drug trafficking and drug abuse (Abu-Saad 2002). Some of the towns have become distressed areas and focal points of frustration and bitterness. The Bedouin have been left to their own devices in integrating into the regional wage labour market in Israel, and public
Educational, health and community services are supplied to them by the state (Meir 1997, 169–92).

Evil eye beliefs and treatments have not disappeared with urbanisation and increased access to modern medicine. Even so, my fieldwork indicated that the greater the extent of traditionalism in Bedouin society, the wider the prevalence of belief in supernatural powers (like the evil eye) as causes of sickness, and the higher the rate of consulting traditional healers. When the Bedouin recognise an illness as having purely natural causes, they apply modern medicine; when supernatural causes are suspected, they consult traditional healers.

Consulting traditional healers has established a relationship of psychological-therapeutic dependence on the part of the Bedouin with regard to the healers. This dependence is deeply rooted in their psyche and it is reinforced and legitimised by Bedouin culture (Abu-Rabia 1999, 17–25). It should be noted that in the past twenty to thirty years there has been an increase in the return to the faith (resurgent Islam), and it is taking hold of the young, the disaffected and those who have not integrated into Western Israeli society, giving them a strong Islamic identity. This move is spearheaded by al-haraka al-islamiya (Islamic Movement). Some new Muslim healers have appeared who treat illnesses by reading phrases from the Quran and using olive oil. As a result of the penetration of normative Islam into Bedouin society, the belief in the evil eye has not diminished but has become more widespread, as has the use of Quranic phrases in methods to prevent or cure it.

That evil eye beliefs are so entrenched in Bedouin culture may be attributable in part to the unstable ecological and environmental conditions in which they live: the harsh desert climate, with its extremes of heat and cold, frequent droughts and sometimes even floods; malnutrition, poor sanitation and illness. The requisites for survival in the desert have left their imprint on the Bedouin’s economic pursuits, social and cultural values, beliefs and religion. Islam, the official religion of the Bedouin, is a system of beliefs originally formulated by Muhammad in order to provide spiritual solutions to the harsh environmental problems of the Bedouin. Islam is now a banner for the overall religious identity of the Bedouin, although it is in fact one of several beliefs systems simultaneously practised by them (Ben-Assa 1970, 13–18; Bailey 1982, 65–88; Levi 1987, 385–431).

Evil Eye Traditions: Interpretations and Comparisons

In many respects, the Bedouin beliefs are consistent with evil eye traditions elsewhere in their range of distribution—mainly, the Middle East, North Africa, Europe and India (Ryan 2005, sub “Evil Eye”). The evil eye is commonly associated with envy, and transmitted by a look, touch or verbal expression of envy, or by excessive praise without a blessing (Elworthy 1895, 1–43). It has also been said that evil eye beliefs are a response to the naturally adverse power of a strange look or stare (Marcais 1960, 784–6). Certain individuals with the evil eye are thought to cause harm habitually, even deliberately; others may do it accidentally and unconsciously. It is generally considered to cause sickness, loss of vitality and even death in the object of envy. People who are outstandingly beautiful or healthy, and children, are thought to be especially vulnerable to it (Shiloh 1961, 277–88). The evil eye is also related to the more widespread concept of witchcraft in the sense of
an innate, sometimes hereditary, capacity to cause supernatural harm, which is part of that individual’s organic constitution and, unlike sorcery, requires no particular action or ritual but can work simply by wishing harm on another. Like witchcraft, the evil eye is both a retrospective explanation of misfortune and a powerful incentive to conform to norms of social behaviour, especially good neighbourliness, reciprocity and charity (Thomas 1971, 564–6). When misfortune occurs, people who believe in witchcraft and the evil eye may interpret the misfortune as supernatural retaliation for their own earlier acts of unkindness towards certain individuals, who thus become the focus of projected feelings of guilt (Marwick 1970, 16–17; Thomas 1971, 555–8; Briggs 2002, 139–45).

Several studies have investigated evil eye beliefs in the Middle East and North Africa (Westermarck 1926, vol. I, 414–78; Evans-Pritchard 1937, esp. 100–3; Granqvist 1947, 84–8; Stillman 1970, 81–94; Edwards 1971, 33–40; Foster 1972, 165–202; Spooner 1976, 76–84; cf Dundes 1981, 257–98). Notwithstanding broad similarities, there are significant regional and cultural variations. Fredrik Barth, for example, found that the Persian nomadic tribes believed that it was unconscious envy that caused harm; therefore, only friends, acquaintances and relations were able to cast the evil eye, while declared enemies were powerless to do so (Barth 1961, 145). According to Hammad Ammar’s study of peasant society in southern Egypt, on the other hand, it was particularly critical to guard against the impact of the evil eye from relatives outside the economic family household unit (Ammar 1954, 62). While many aspects of the Bedouin’s evil eye traditions are common throughout middle-eastern and Islamic societies, certain features are more unusual, including curing the evil eye by magically transferring it to the healer, which will be discussed later.

The Evil Eye in Islamic Sources

Medieval Islamic authors had much to say about the evil eye and its treatment. In the ninth century AD, the Imam Muslim Ibn al-Hajjaj reported that the Prophet said: “The evil eye is true, and if there were anything in the world which would overcome Fate, it would be an evil eye” (Sahih Muslim 1998, 422). The Prophet ordered that incantations be recited to guard against the evil eye. In his Book of Medicine, al-Bukhari (810–72 AD) recorded that the Prophet one day saw a servant girl with sa’fa (or suf’a, a black or brown mark or excoriation) on her face, and said: “Recite incantations for her, for the ‘glance’ is on her” (Sahih al-Bukhari 1974, 426). It was said that she was suffering from an evil eye inflicted by the stare of the jinns, whose piercing gaze is more deadly than the points of spears.

Al-Jawziyya (1292–350 AD) argued at length about the logic behind the belief in the power of the evil eye. He insisted that the power rests not with the eye of a person, but rather with the spirit (nafs) working through it (al-Jawziyya 1957, 127–36). He said that people have been known to become ill from a gaze that causes their faculties to weaken. All this transpires due to the power of the spirits. Spirits vary in their nature, their powers, their qualities and their characteristics. The spirit of a jealous person is one of impurity, which takes on an evil quality that provokes real, perceptible damage to the envied person, animal or property. It is sometimes thought to have a poisonous quality. In almost all cases, the evil eye conveys an impure spirit (nafs najsih), as opposed to the pure spirit (nafs tahira) of
saints and healers. Najsîh derives from najasa, which means “pollution,” “dirt,” “obscenity,” “defilement,” “contamination” or “filth.” Purity and pollution represent opposite ends of a continuum derived from religious ideas.

The impact of the evil eye is not directly related to the faculty of sight, for it can be inflicted by an envious person who happens to be blind, or who simply hears a description of the object of envy without actually seeing it, just as it can be caused by excessive praise without a blessing. And while the evil eye may harm someone via physical contact or a face-to-face encounter, this is not a precondition for the effect either: it is enough for the impure spirit to direct its energy towards the person, animal or object it wishes to affect.

Protection from the Evil Eye in Islamic Traditions

Protection from these negative effects of the evil eye can be achieved through prayers and incantations and seeking refuge with Allah. For this reason, Allah told his Prophet to take refuge with him from the evil of the envier: “And lo! Those who disbelieve would fain disconcert thee with their eyes when they hear the Reminder, and they say: Lo! He is indeed mad” (Quran 68: 51). One can seek protection by saying the prayers called the “Throne Verse” (Ayit al-Kursi) and the two Suras: “The Daybreak” (al-Falaq) and “Mankind” (al-Nas) (Quran 2: 255, 113: 1–5 and 114: 1–6). The two Suras, known as al-Mu ‘awwadhateyn, are supplications for refuge and protection. These two Suras were also used to protect and treat the Prophet and his followers from the evil eye and the witchcraft of feminine “blowers upon knots” (a common form of witchcraft in the Arabian Peninsula, where women were said to tie knots in a cord and blow upon them, while uttering a curse). Another treatment for the evil eye is the charm (ruqya) that the angel named Jibril said for the Prophet:

In the name of Allah I recite this ruqya over you. From every ill which can harm you, from the evil of every soul [nafs] and envious eye, Allah heals you. In the name of Allah I recite this ruqya over you (al-Jawziyya 1957, 133).

Sometimes the person afflicted by the evil eye is healed by washing himself, since the evil eye resembles a blazing torch (shu’lat nar), so that washing or ablation by water is used to extinguish it. Indeed, medication works through its opposite (dawa’ al-shay’ bi-didihi). Another incantation that made oblique reference to this “blazing torch” is one mentioned by al-Jawziyya concerning al-Tayyahi [a Bedouin traveller]:

While on one of his journeys, al-Tayyahi rode a lively she-camel (naqa). Meanwhile in the company there was a man who possessed the evil eye. He could hardly ever gaze at anything without inflicting damage. This man went to al-Tayyahi’s tethering place, and looked and gazed at the she-camel. The she-camel became disturbed and fell down. When al-Tayyahi returned he was told about what had happened to his she-camel. Al-Tayyahi stood above the culprit and said: “In the name of Allah, a confinement that confines, a dry stone, a blazing fire; I have turned the eye of the evil-eyed back upon himself, and upon those dearest to him.” He then recited: “So return the sight; do you see any flaw; then return the sight twice; your sight will come back to you dull and discomforted, in a worn-out state” (Quran 67: 3–4). The pupils of the eyes of the evil-eyed one fell out, while the she-camel got up again, none the worse (al-Jawziyya 1957, 136).
There are some traits that arouse the suspicion that a person possesses the power of an evil eye: meanness, covetousness, jealousy, ocular defects (especially squinting eyes [*ashwass*]), blue eyes, barrenness, or any expression of admiration without mentioning Allah’s or Muhammad’s good blessings—*mabruk bism Allah* ("congratulations in the name of God"), *ma sha’ Allah* ("what God wishes"), *udhkur nabiya* ("haste unto remembrance of the Prophet"), *udhkur rabbak* ("haste unto remembrance of God"). The Bedouin people believe that a person who possesses an evil eye may or may not know that he has this attribute. The evil eye exists in various degrees of power, including:

- **Unconscious**: The person admires an object, causing damage or illness. He/she casts the evil eye without consciously wishing to do so.
- **Conscious**: The possessor of an evil eye knows that he/she has this power. He/she may have been born with it. Ordinary folk fear him/her, because he/she is an omen of bad luck.
- **Hereditary**: The *‘aradh*—a person who suddenly appears in front of you, walking towards you, or crossing your path—is the most dangerous (*al-Munjid fi al-Lugha wal-‘Alam* 1975, 498). His evil eye can bring one bad luck and a bad day if one encounters him by chance, particularly in the morning. This characteristic is hereditary, passed on from a person to his children. His animals and property are considered to be contaminated by his character and trait, so they are not recommended to be hired for work, or even to be bought. Such persons can even afflict themselves, their children or their property, and they cast the evil eye merely through their evil nature. It is the worst of the three types, therefore. When you see him, you should say “*Alla ya’ardh lak*” ("God causes damage to you," "God protects me from your havoc"). Sometimes you spit in his direction, on the condition that he does not notice you. His spirit is considered to be impure, dangerous, contaminated and contagious.

The Bedouin are aware of people in their tribes whom they suspect can cast the evil eye or be *‘aradh*. They know that if they are unkind to any of them, the *‘aradh* will bring havoc on the community and cause great confusion and disorder. So, instead of treating them meanly, the community embraces those who are known to be *‘aradh*, and welcomes them to public gatherings, so that everyone can appease them and prevent them from doing any harm. Nevertheless, the *‘aradh* are avoided, especially in the morning, so that one will be a less likely target. That does not mean, however, that the *‘aradh* is less dangerous in the afternoon. The *‘aradh* can be a man, woman, boy or girl; but the old ones are considered to have the most experience, and they are, thus, thought to be the most dangerous.

**Bedouin Medicine**

Traditional Bedouin medicine includes both preventive and curative measures. Preventive medicine refers to methods used to avoid illness, such as hanging amulets and charms on the body, writing verses from the Quran, taking vows, visiting the tombs of saints, taking measures to outwit the evil eye and carefully following rules of behaviour, religion and hygiene. Curative medicine, on the other hand, is applied after the illness—be it physical or mental—has already
struck. The evil eye is one of the most dangerous diseases, and pregnant women and small children are the most vulnerable to it. Pregnant Bedouin women wear wide clothes to hide their pregnancy for fear of the evil eye, and as a matter of modesty. Modesty in Bedouin society is associated with sexuality and femininity (Abu-Lughod 1988, 118–67). Beauty is always vulnerable, and it has been suggested that the origin of veiling women is tied to fear of the evil eye (Levi 1987, 197–205). Individuals passing through rites of passage are also particularly vulnerable.

Traditional Bedouin medicine draws its strength from a reliance on a belief in fate—that everything that happens to one, both good and evil, is the will of Allah. Therefore, a person must accept his/her fate with faith, courage and patience. According to the Bedouin people, both health and illness are in the hands of Allah through natural and supernatural powers created by Him. These powers are the wellsprings of healing. Most illnesses are considered to be a direct punishment for our sins by Allah, who acts through the mediation of human beings, and therefore He cures the sick through traditional healers, doctors or other medical and paramedical professions. There are certain things that enhance health, including the maintenance of basic rules of hygiene, religious practices and respecting norms of behaviour. These concepts are expressed, for example, in abstaining from eating carrion, spoiled food and contaminated water, and avoiding places where there is danger of disease, particularly contagious diseases. The maintenance of proper relationships, good neighbourliness and the regular observance of the rules and commandments of Islam, are all perceived by the Bedouin of the desert as part of a healthy foundation for human society (Abu-Rabia 1983, 1–2). Some of these conceptions concerning disease and medicine are expressed concisely in one verse of the Quran and one of the Hadith. In the Quran we find: “Say: Naught befalleth us save that which Allah hath decreed for us. He is our protecting power. In Allah let believers put their trust” (Quran 9: 51). In the Hadith we are told: “No disease Allah created, but that He created its treatment” (Sahih al-Bukhari 1974, 395).

The evil eye is possessed by a person whom Allah wishes to punish by making him/her “discontent with his lot” (Bailey 1982, 78–80). Such a person is “empty-souled” (aynih farghih). The envious person is harmful, especially if he/she casts a “glance of the eye.” There are also some accursed landmarks that are considered as agents of evil, embodying spirits that afflict passers-by, such as Nagb al-Raknah in Sinai, or the tomb of ’Amri in al-Wadi al-Abyadh of the Negev. In order to be safe from the evil spirits, the Bedouin must stone them, curse them and even defecate and urinate upon them (al-‘Aref 1933, 251–63).

The Bedouin methods of healing, and of preventing damage from the impure spirits of the evil eye, involve the qualities of the four humours in the human body—warm, moist, dry and cold—which, in humoral medical theory, corresponded with the four elements—fire, water, air and earth. A balanced mixture of these humours is required for a person to be healthy (Ullmann 1978, 55–62; Khan 1986, 37–50).

**Birth Rites and Rites to Protect Children**

The birth of sons is much more valued than the birth of daughters. Only males are permitted to succeed the father, and they constitute a source of pride and prestige.
Moreover, it is the males who defend the honour of the family. Thus, a man with no sons is cast into an inferior position among his family members, who say “Poor man! He has no sons to succeed him and no one to defend the family honour” (Patai 1971, 84–114; 1976, 25–40; Morsy 1982, 147–74; Eickelman 1993, 652–66). When a son is born, and particularly when he is the first-born, it is a joyous occasion. Women bless the mother. The husband’s male friends and relatives congratulate him on the birth of a son, and during the first week he holds a ceremony (muruq, isbu’) to celebrate the birth of a new male and his acceptance into the family. By the time the ceremony takes place the father has announced his son’s name. Sometimes the baby’s name is chosen before birth, as a vow (nadhir), such as Mhammad [Muhammad]. These names are considered to have apotropaic power to protect the new-born from the evil eye.

When a daughter is born the father does not hold a ceremony and usually is not congratulated by his male relatives and friends. The women comfort the mother with the blessing: “Congratulations on the birth of a daughter.” The daughter’s name is usually chosen by the mother together with her husband and mother-in-law. When a mother of daughters gives birth to another girl, she chooses a name that symbolically expresses hope, such as Kfayih, which means “enough daughters.”

Rites to Protect Children and Adults

It is customary to smear the forehead of a baby with indigo to protect the child from the evil eye. Indigo (indigofera, known in Arabic as nilih) is considered to have medicinal properties in the Middle East (Balfour-Paul 1997, 2–9). The application of kohl to blacken the baby’s eyelids or dimple is for medicinal purposes, as well as protection against the evil eye. (Black has been used to ward off harm from beautiful children since early Islam and, according to Islamic tradition, the Prophet wore a black turban to protect himself from the evil eye while preaching one day [al-Jawziyya 1957, 136]). When a family has a male child, blue beads known as kushshash (“to kick out the evil eye”) are hung on his head covering (augayih [“baby’s bonnet”]), or on his head, either singly or as a string of beads. Usually it is the mother or the grandmother of the child who prepares these beads and hangs them, while reciting verses from the Quran and other blessings. Some women put alum (shabbih) in the beads so that if the evil eye does appear, it will attack the shabbih and grind it to a powder instead of harming the infant. [4] The blue beads are called kushshash because of their shape, which is like an eye. Both the blue beads and the white alum serve as protection against the evil eye. The ends of the threads tying these blue beads resemble a baby’s legs, which are said to hit or kick the evil eye. It is rare for Bedouin babies to be without a bead or a talisman of some sort on their bodies.

The Bedouin believe that, in childhood, boys are more susceptible to the evil eye than girls. The newborn baby is regarded as being vulnerable (najmih khaffif, hassas) to the gaze of a stranger or a strange look by someone familiar to the family. Strange gazes of either type are believed to be capable of bringing harm. According to Bedouin women, a covetous look towards the baby can potentially jeopardise the child’s well-being. It is also believed that undesirable traits can be transferred to the baby through an alien gaze, touch or kiss. Everything possible is
done, therefore, to protect sons: amulets and blue beads are hung on him, or he is dressed in blue garments. He may be dressed in a female head-covering or girls’ clothing; his hair may be allowed to grow long, like a girl’s; a girl’s name may be given to him, or kohl is smeared on his eyes, as is customary among girls. These are all measures to trick the evil eye because, knowing that girls are less valued than boys in Bedouin society, it will think that the disguised boy is a girl and go in search of a male infant elsewhere.

**Rites to Protect Adults**

The Bedouin traditionally hang amulets on the body of adults to prevent the evil eye, devils, impure spirits and other illnesses from attacking the bearer of the amulet. Generally, an amulet is written by a traditional healer, who uses special books or notebooks. The writer of amulets is called the khatib or hajjab and the amulet is called hijab, meaning “protection,” “shield” or “veil.” The amulet is written in ink on paper, then folded into a triangle, wrapped in cloth or leather and hung on the body. The amulet contains combinations of letters, words, symbols, numbers, verses from the Quran, and so on, and only the amulet writer knows their meaning. The Bedouin believe that no one else must open the amulet and read it; whoever does so will be punished by the devils. They also believe that the amulet loses its effectiveness when it is opened or gets wet. Human beings, livestock, horses, camels and any other living creature are protected from injury by the evil eye if they carry an amulet. Amulets contain verses from the Quran that are intended to provide protection, as well as to cure illnesses or various other phenomena believed to be caused by devils, impure spirits, magic, and the evil eye (Abu-Rabia 1983, 4).

**Rites of Exorcism of the Evil Eye**

According to Bedouin custom, a person afflicted or harmed by the evil eye is cared for and cured by a woman healer—an elderly lady, or the mother or grandmother of the afflicted. The following account illustrates the process:

Ahmad felt unwell, and seemed to be afflicted by the evil eye. His mother was a healer. She took three pieces of alum (shabbih), one personifying men, the second women, and the third devils and jinns. Then she put them in her right hand and made a circular motion above Ahmad’s head several times, and asking Allah to heal him. At the same time, she also denounced the evil eye and threatened it with the intervention of Allah and the prophets, unless it would leave Ahmad’s body without causing him harm. She read passages from The Quran (2: 255, 113: 1–5 and 114: 1–6), and other verses and spells.

As is common, the healer yawned while treating him, and shed tears while yawning. Then she placed the three pieces of shabbih in the coals of the tent fire. After leaving them there for several moments, she removed them from the fire and examined them closely. Their shape determined whether the source of the evil eye was a man, a woman, or a devil. (One experienced old lady claimed she could even tell the name of the person who was the source of the evil eye.) She then took the three pieces of shabbih, crushed them in her hand, and smeared some of the shabbih powder on Ahmad’s forehead, elbows and heels (cf. Donaldson 1981, 75). The remainder was mixed with water and thrown behind the tent, while the healer called upon the evil eye to depart from the body (’uqub ya sharr). She then tied Ahmad’s forehead with a kerchief and gave him a cup of tea, after which he lay and rested until he felt well (cf Naff 1965, 46–51).
If there is no shabbih, salt (milh) will be used instead.

It should be emphasised that the exorcism of the evil eye is a role traditionally assigned to a female healer, usually an old lady or a righteous woman using pieces of alum that are put into fire. The metamorphosis of the alum is imbued with magical significance—the process is believed to exorcise the evil eye from the body of the patient by transferring it to the body of the female healer. The exorcist (the female healer) remains unaffected by the transferred evil eye for she is endowed with sacred qualities and safeguarded by the angels during the treatment as she calls out the name of Allah, his Prophets and righteous ones, and recites verses from the Quran. Usually, the afflicted person and the healer take a bath, since their bodies were defiled by impure spirits.

The Bedouin call the person afflicted by the evil eye ‘ardhan (derived from ‘aradh). The ceremony of exorcism of the evil eye is called diara (“circling,” named after the hand motion performed over the patient’s head) or itkhiiffiff (or tkhiffiff, meaning “to alleviate” the disease).

It is worth noting that, in the Middle East, only the Bedouin of the Negev practise this method of exorcism; that is, exorcising the evil eye from the patient’s body through the body of the healer as a mediator.

Additional Methods of Protection Against and Treatment Of the Evil Eye:

Protection

- **Horseshoes**: Hang a horseshoe above the tent or house.
- **Beads**: Hang on the person special beads called nafs to ward off the evil eye. The shape and the colour of these beads are held to resemble a deformed eye.
- **Incense**: Burn incense (bakhkhur) to prevent evil eye by fumigation.

Treatment

- **Fumigation**: Burning a fragment of the suspect’s garment. If a person suspected of possessing an evil eye has been identified as such, the healer will try to take a small piece of cloth (’alaq al-hasid), even a thread, from the person’s clothing, without his/her knowledge. The piece of cloth or thread will then be placed in a fire so that the smoke will enter the nostrils and eyes of the sick person, while verses and spells are recited. This process is called ktur (“fumigation”); the afflicted person is called manfous (derived from nafs, “soul”), and the person possessing the evil eye is called al-hasid.
- **Incense**: Burn incense (bakhkhur) to treat the evil eye by fumigation.
- **Flour and salt**: Go to a righteous widow who has not betrayed her husband after he died. Borrow flour and salt from her and sprinkle it on the coals of the campfire so that the person afflicted by the evil eye will inhale the smoke. It should be mentioned here that flour and salt are both white, like the alum.
- **Saliva**: Go to healers or righteous (Darwish) men, such as some from the tribe Hasanat Bin Sabbah, who belong to the Jubarat clan, or from the al-‘Aayiadih, who belong to the al-Sawarkih clan. The healer spits on the person afflicted with the evil eye, who is instantly cured. The saliva of a man cures men, that of a woman cures women, a boy’s saliva cures boys and a girl’s cures girls.
Earth: A handful of earth (kamshit trab) is taken from the place where a person possessing the evil eye has stepped. It is put into a cup of boiling water, and the afflicted person is healed by inhaling the steam.

Lead (rasas, sakbih): If one does not know the source of the evil eye or the case is very complicated, the afflicted person is seated alone on the top of a hill and a pure woman (a healer) called Fatmih [Fatima] is brought there. She places a large bowl of water on the patient’s head and pours molten lead into it. The molten metal hitting the water causes an explosive sound that scares the patient, who is thus cured. The healer examines the now solidified granules of lead to find the image of the suspect. This practice is common in the Middle East and North Africa (al-’Aref 1933, 243–64; Ben-Assa 1970; 1974; Abu-Rabia 1999, 44–51).

The Hand of Fatima: The Bedouin hang a pendant called khamsa, representing the palm of the hand, on their children; according to the common Muslim belief, it is the hand of Fatima, the daughter of the Prophet Muhammad, which has special spiritual powers.

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Treatment and Protection of Livestock Against the Evil Eye

The evil eye can also be detrimental, and even fatal, to livestock and their offspring. The source is a person who is jealous, covetous or greedy. The following account illustrates the treatment of animals hurt by the evil eye:

Mahmud and his wife Saluma, found that the ram of their flock was sick and they suspected that it was afflicted by the evil eye. Saluma took dry chicken manure, guano of pigeons and dry olive leaves, mixed these with coals in a bowl and placed it before the ram in such a way that the smoke rising from the bowl entered the ram’s nostrils and drove away the evil eye. Saluma also recited verses from the Quran (2: 225, 113: 1–5 and 114: 1–6). Afterwards, the remaining material was thrown into the air so that it would be dispersed, while Saluma said “Oh evil eye, go away from here!” (“uqubb ya sharr!”).

This method of treatment is called ktur (“fumigation”).

The Bedouin have a wide variety of other preventive measures and methods of treatment. One should:

- Stay away from people known to be the source of the evil eye.
- Offer to sell the animals afflicted by the evil eye without actually planning to follow through on the offer. Thus tricked, the evil eye will depart.
- Hang a blue bead and the tooth of a dead donkey around the afflicted animal’s neck or on its bridle. It is advisable to hang them between the animal’s ears so that they dangle over its forehead, where they can be seen by anyone who might seek to do injury by gazing at the animal. Thus they serve as a preventive charm.
- Hang a small piece of flint (hajar suwan) on the neck of the animal as protection from the evil eye. The Bedouin have a phrase they commonly use to protect themselves and their livestock from an evil eye emanating from women: fi ‘ayun al-niswan, hajar suwan (“Flint will protect us from the evil eye of women”).
- Hang a charm or amulet on the neck of the animal. The charm may contain various verses from the Quran, such as Ayit al-kursi (Quran 2: 255).
- Recite the following verses from the Quran seven times around the herd—1: 1–7, 2: 255, 113: 1–5 and 114: 1–6.
- Mix dry dog dung with water and pour one cup of the solution over the afflicted animal.
- Bang on pieces of metal to make loud noises behind the herd to scare the herd and exorcise the evil eye.
- Paint the backs of the sheep with red paint (symbolising the blood at the time of slaughter) to fool the evil eye into not harming the herd.
- Shoot into the air over the heads of the herd as a measure for treating or preventing the evil eye (see similar descriptions in Abu-Rabia 1994; 1999).

Conclusions

The Bedouins distinguish three levels of danger presented by the evil eye, ranging from the simplest level of unconsciously causing harm to the most complex level of consciously wishing to do so.

A person who possesses an evil eye is said to have impure spirits that convey an intense will and the desire to cause harm, disorder and damage, whether by looking at the victim or by means of direct or indirect rites, such as prayers or curses.

With its impure spirits, the evil eye is thought to afflict human beings, animals, agriculture and property. Those who are most vulnerable to the evil eye are the healthy, the beautiful, the rich, boys, pregnant women and babies.

It is believed that the evil eye can be counteracted by many different protective and curative measures. Some of these combine secular and religious practices, such as incantations, fumigations, prayers, charms, amulets, vows, sacrifices, incense, plants, minerals, saliva, colours (blue and black are the most widely used by the Bedouin), beads (especially blue ones) and products from certain animals or reptiles.

Women believe more in the evil eye than men do. Most healing methods are, therefore, practised by women, although amulets are made by men.

Bedouin evil eye beliefs have not disappeared following urbanisation and access to modern medicine.

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Notes

[1] This paper was presented at the International Conference on Health and Illness in Middle East Societies, 11 June 2002, at the Department of Middle East Studies, Ben-Gurion University, Israel.
[3] ‘Aradh: In some cases you only see him, and that means that he ‘aradth lak (“crossed your path and caused you bad luck”). The term ‘aradth derives from the Arabic word ‘ird—which means “spirit,” “soul” or “one’s self.” Al-‘Irrid means the man who brings evil or mischief to people (al-Munjid fi al-Lugha wal ‘Alam 1975, 498). In this context, it means that the impure spirit of that person crossed your path and caused you bad luck and misfortune.
Shabbih: alum, is either potash alum, potassium aluminium sulphate or ammonia alum. During the British Mandate in Palestine, there was a sulphur quarry in al-Mashabib south-east of Gaza (in the territory of al-Hanajra clan), which produced shabbih for all of Palestine, and some of it was also exported.

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