



INVOKING THE SPIRITS

Matiasmenos

Schneir Levin

Doctors with an interest in folklore will know of the Greek *matiasmenos*, the evil eye. They will have noticed a small blue eye-bead attached to the wrist of a baby or toddler, a kind of beneficent eye to ward off the evil eye. Greek grandmothers can often be induced to agree to a doctor's supposedly serious suggestion that the cause of the baby's illness is the *matiasmenos*, even when they have brought the grandchild to the doctor for treatment

Less emphatic acceptance of the malevolent influence of the evil eye can be found among Italians but they, even grandmothers, will laugh at my (straight-faced) suggestion that the cause of the infant's illness is the *malocchio* (bad eye) together with the *jettatore* (evil glance), and that effective treatment includes the use of the *cornu*, a small horn, or two fingers pointed as horns.

Among Jews there is often the thoughtlessly invoked expression *keinenhora*, from the Hebrew *kein ayin hara* (no evil eye) when mention is made of a child exposed to illness or danger.

The evil eye features prominently in Arab culture and is banished by the picture or small representation of a hand, the *hamsa*, supposedly that of Fatima the daughter of Mahomet.

Even the German culture gives an odd wink at *Der Bose Blick*, the evil eye.

The evil eye is unknown in black Africa and locally — its place is taken by the malevolent *tokoloshe*.

A kind of evil eye is known to this day in Western culture. A 'lullaby' is not a song to soothe a fractious infant but an incantation to keep away lulla, lili, lili-bye-bye. Who was lili? She was the ancient Babylonian Lilith, the chief of the demons and the first (failed) wife of Adam. She was banished to the underworld, there to spawn with her mate Asmodeus all the evil demons in the world. In modern terms these demons have become microdemons and microbes.¹ Lilith was especially feared during the first days of new life; when a mother gave birth, both mother and baby were to be secreted away from the perils of the demonic world for 40 days, after which the vulnerable period was over and the infant could be taken outside the confines of the closed and protected home.

New mothers go to the doctor or obstetrician for a postnatal

The author is a Johannesburg physician to children. His chief interest is the history of child care. His book A Philosophy of Infant Feeding was published in the USA in 1963 and his slender book Best Jewish Jokes in London in 1968. He has written a great deal on theology.

check-up 6 weeks after the birth; at the same time the baby is also taken for a check-up to the doctor or paediatrician. Why 6 weeks? Why not 4 or 7 weeks? Because 6 weeks is just about 40 days, and the doctor's judgement is required to assure the mother that she and baby are no longer vulnerable to attack by Lilith. Is this a possible reason?

To return to *matiasmenos* and to a method of de-spooking its evil effects. On 10 July 1989 (I keep notes on such matters) I was called to a nearby home to see a 2-year-old boy who had been crying much of the night. The cause was immediately evident — otitis media. The grandmother was present with the mother and when she told me that she was from the island of Castellorizo, near Rhodes, I said, with serious look, that the cause of the illness could be the *matiasmenos*, to which she immediately agreed. We discussed this for a minute during which she pointed to a protective icon of Damian and Cosmos and mentioned also that babies were not subject to the *mati* if born on a Saturday or with blue eyes.

There is a ritual, grandma said, that would assist the antibiotic I had prescribed. She held the boy on her lap and intoned: *enas ina ologos/pro ton theos/O Christos perasse me/tous apostolos ton/to kaka eskorpisse/exo ke paraexo makria* (one is the word/towards God/Christ passed together/with his disciples/the evil be scattered/out and further out, far out).

Is there anything else that would help, I asked, especially the use of cloves? When mother explained to grandma what cloves were, and that she had some cloves in the kitchen, grandma immediately agreed to show me how cloves could defeat the *mati*.

She fetched 12 cloves, pinned one with a needle tip and inserted it into a candle flame. It made a popping sound as it burned out. She then did the same with the next 11 cloves, only two of which popped, but that was enough, she said. She then put the burned cloves into a glass of water and warned that the glass was not to be washed until the morrow.

Then, while making the sign of the cross over the boy's hair, over both cheeks and over his chin, she intoned: *osi miloun ke laloun/starostous ke karfostous* (whoever talks and scandals/cross them and nail them).

Finally she instructed her daughter to take the glass of water in which the burned cloves had popped, outside, to the nearest crossroad, and there to spill the water and contents for passing animals or vehicles to crush.

Her treatment (and mine!) was successful, for when examined a week later, the boy's ear had healed.

1. Levin S. Draughts. *Lancet* 1968; 1: 806.