

The Language of Magic

Edited by Eleonora Cianci and Nicholas Wolf

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UNDOING THE “EVIL EYE” IN ITALY: A COMPARISON OF FOLK DOCUMENTATION FROM 1965-70 WITH PRESENT RESEARCH

Lia Giancristofaro

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ABSTRACT

“Undoing” the evil eye using spoken charms is a traditional remedy in many cultural settings and involves a folk healer drawing the imagined evil (cast by an evil gaze) out of the body of the “victim”. The capacity to erase the magic gaze is applied through the narrative power of a verbal format (a charm or a *historiolae*) that uses performative language and speech actions. This essay is based on a researcher’s daughter resurveying a territory investigated half a century ago by her father. The article can thus focus on the traditional culture of Abruzzo, analyzing the folk documentation collected in 1965-70 and in the present time. Anthropological records mention the popular belief that the evil eye produces illness, discomfort, and bad luck, but this is a reversible condition. The best way to save victims is to eliminate the evil eye by using “professional charms”, which are still practiced and handed down to new generations of charmers. Anthropological records also mention that this technique is practiced above all by elderly women within their family group, and that they do not charge for their magic work. These women enhance their prestige in their social in-group through their skills in removing the evil eye. By performing a caring act for a person, based on protection and interdependence between older and younger generations, an evil eye set of beliefs is handed down and is still very much alive.

Keywords: Abruzzi; ethnography; magic; spells; transmission between generations.

1. WORDS THAT CURE THE PERSON: A RITE THAT REMOVES
THE “MALOCCHIO”

Like all other rituals, the practices that focus on the body and overcoming malaise and illness are part of a specific cultural system and cannot be read as “isolated phenomena”. These rituals are interwoven with ideologies and change people’s lives in an inexplicable way not quantifiable by Western medical science. Therapies used by “traditional medicine” actually tend to consider body and soul in the same framework, and are put in place using healing dynamics that go from soul to body, and vice versa, without the limitations posed by Western medical science¹, which is highly technical and technological. “Traditional medicine” is frequently based on magic and is intended to help the patient overcome an ailment that is as real as it is imaginary, combining speech, gestures, song, music, dance, and prayer to represent the expulsion of evil and the incorporation of good².

This essay examines the tradition of undoing the “evil eye” in Abruzzo, and I have used the folk documentation collected in the past by my father Emiliano Giancristofaro (1965-70), which I compare with documentation I collected myself in recent times during fieldwork conducted over the decade 2008-20. “Undoing” a magic spell with words is the traditional remedy applied in many cultural contexts and it is performed by a folk healer who draws the imaginary evil (brought by an evil eye) out of the body of the “victim”. The capacity to cancel the power of the person with the evil eye is applied through a narrative based on a spoken long format (*historiola*) that uses performative language and speech actions³.

My father was an ethnologist who concentrated on traditional Abruzzo culture. In this context he analysed folk documentation he had collected in 1965-70⁴. His ethnological records (around two thousand hours of inter-

¹ In some respects, Western medical science also constitutes “traditional knowledge”, as it is one part of Western culture; however, Western medical science differs from “traditional medicines” in that it separates care of the body from care of the psyche (or of the soul, for those who believe in it).

² Anthropology began observing “faith” healing in the late nineteenth century with Jean-Martin Charcot (1897), whose ideas were an inspiration and were even pursued by Sigmund Freud, reaching us with Gallini 1998. See also Seppilli 2019.

³ The *historiola* is a modern term for a kind of incantation incorporating a short mythic story that provides the paradigm for the desired magical action (in this case, the elimination of the evil eye is made by a religious intervention).

⁴ Giancristofaro 1971.

views with people local to Abruzzo and Molise) comprise audio-visual files produced by means of a tape recorder and camera, and are now available for public consultation in Rome at the Archivio Sonoro Franco Coggiola. About three hundred people were interviewed, all of whom believed in the evil eye and described the charms used to undo it⁵. This collection of ethnological records documents the belief that the evil eye produces illness, malaise, or possibly death for babies or animals, and also damage to inanimate objects like cars or houses. The established method for saving the victims was to undo the spell using the “professional charm” of a *magaro* or a *magara*, namely, a local charmer. Those charmers are paid for their services in cash or in kind. But this collection of ethnological records suggests in no uncertain terms that magical skills are very common among women and are used by older female relatives to help younger generations, and are free of charge⁶.

The knowledge of such a folk healer is a sum of skills and practices based on native theories, beliefs, and experiences, whether rational or otherwise, applied to safeguard health as well as diagnose or treat illness, anxiety, and danger. These health practices are not part of conventional Italian medicine and are not integrated into the major healthcare system, but today they are used interchangeably with that system, just as they were fifty years ago. Put simply, people consult their doctor but they also consult a charmer to be on the safe side.

2. UNDOING THE EVIL EYE IN ABRUZZO, PAST AND PRESENT

The main theoretical and methodological reference accompanying this field research drew above all on three areas of anthropology: ritual, corporal, and the work of central Italy. With regard to charms and rites discussed in this article, the theorizations of both Malinowski (1954) and Radcliffe-Brown (1952) suggest seeking the manifestation of the legitimacy of important collective values in rituality. Tambiah (1985) points us in the direction of gestures and words, which all the observed charms and rituals possess in profusion.

There was also careful attention to the most appropriate investigative strategy. This article favors the diachronic line of research (almost sixty

⁵ Giancristofaro 2018.

⁶ Giancristofaro 1971, 180.

years of monitoring the same culture in the same region), so I regret that a more sociological analysis here could not really be developed, making room for questions of social inequalities and gender. I am attempting to give some indication of the status of the people I have spoken to, but I think this article fits with linguistics, ethnology, and religious studies rather than the critical theoretical fields of health anthropology and sociology. My father's fieldwork was spread over five years, from 1965 to 1970, and was inspired by Malinowski's theories highlighting psychological functions, and also the ideas of De Martino (1961) of the rite as a symbolic solution for "expelling negativity from the story"⁷.

My fieldwork was undertaken from 2008 to 2020 and conducted using interpretive anthropology⁸. A thick description explains the concept of the rite as being conveyed by informants in the researched community, and they never see it as a joke or something silly. In each interview, the charmer expressed the intention to show that all efforts are concentrated on producing a traditional charm and ritual that will help people as much as possible. The significance was then analyzed through the tools offered by the tradition of anthropological theory⁹.

Both field surveys were conducted through participant observation: the various charms and rites were seen during the preparatory, development, and concluding phases. It was a long process to observe the changes in the preparation and performance of the charm ritual in each family encountered by me or my father. After each observation, in-depth interviews were conducted with the different players in the community so as to explore the studied rites and underlying dynamics further. Because of new European privacy laws (namely, General Data Protection Regulation or GDPR), I am unable to publish interviews with all personal stories and names, only a transcription of my notes on stories and actions¹⁰. Both field surveys identified various key informants and developed interactions with them. The life stories of three charmers were also

⁷ Giancristofaro 1971, 43.

⁸ Geertz 1973.

⁹ Among others, Rappaport 1999; Gluckman 1962; Turner 1982.

¹⁰ Unfortunately, the GDPR makes it impossible to cite the personal and private stories of the informants. Conversely, field and archival researchers in past situations have managed to do this without breaking the law. This leaves the reading with an interesting but somewhat "general" feeling until we get to the ethnographic data about the university student. I hope to add extra ethnographic data with more fieldwork testimonies without breaking the law. I hope anyway that this article is a contribution as it currently stands, and will be of interest to a wide readership.

collected and this made it possible to explore their identity in a “professional” dimension. Specific visual anthropology methods (pictures) were not used because of privacy restrictions, as demanded by the persons I interviewed. Both field surveys highlight that the rituals aiming to undo the “evil eye” are appreciated by the young generation and controlled by the older members of the community. But how does the evil eye mechanism work in Abruzzo?

The “evil eye” comes in the guise of a malevolent glance with subsequent negative effects such as malaise, illness, or misfortune. In Abruzzo society, indeed throughout the south of Italy, the evil eye “set of beliefs” has been handed down since Roman times, and the proof is found in the amulets displayed in Chieti National Archaeological Museum¹¹. Those who espouse this belief are convinced this malevolent glance can be erased through the specific ritual of chanting a formula and making signs over a dish of water. Many families decide to call in someone to undo the evil eye each time a person is sick, and these are mainly elderly women. The charm performance is interesting as it is related not only to the body and the sacred, but also to strategies of recognition and affirmation of roles and social hierarchy. The ritual event, closely related to the family context, is performed in the home. In the most serious cases of a “resistant evil eye”, the family turns to a professional charmer, who is paid for their work. When the spell is cast at home by a grandmother or an aunt, no payment is needed.

When a person feels the effects of the evil eye, the family takes it very seriously and decides to practice the well-known “dish of water” ritual, which serves to ascertain whether a person has actually been affected by the evil eye, and to expel it if there is a positive response from the oracle. The victim of the evil eye and a specific person – often an elderly woman deemed to have the power to neutralize the spell – sit at the kitchen table. Other people close to the victim may sit at the table too, but must remain silent. The charmer fills a soup dish with water and puts a metal knife or scissors in it, symbolically intended to cut the evil eye. In silence, the woman pours a drop of olive oil into the water: if it spreads, it means the person has come under the evil eye (*Figs. 1 and 2*). The reaction of the water is an analogy of the malevolent glance, expanding to harm the victim. Then the charmer has to attack this drop of oil, which symbolizes the evil eye’s merciless effect on the victim. With the knife or scissors, she makes the gesture of cutting the drop of oil and recites the charm or

¹¹ Giancristofaro 1971; Papi 2006.

sometimes the entire *historiola*, which varies depending on which person is believed to cast the evil eye and, of course, depending on the location. The spell invokes saints, demonstrating that today's popular tradition is woven from Catholicism and paganism. Consider below the most common charm formula found in 1965-70 by Giancristofaro senior:

Du ucchie t' à ucchiate (two eyes looked at you in envy) / *Tre Sante t' à iutate* (three saints helped you) / *'ncbe lu nome de lu Patre* (in the name of the Father) / *lu Fijolo e Spiridu Sante* (the Son and the Holy Spirit) / *lu malucchie va 'rrete e* (the evil eye goes back and) / *nne vva ccbiù avante* (no longer goes forward).¹²

The charmer recites these words three times, signing the victim's forehead with three crosses with her right thumb, which she dips into the water in the dish (*Fig. 1*).

Another variant is used when an unmarried woman casts the evil eye. It is widely believed in peasant societies that women without husbands and children are a negative element because they do not contribute to the reproduction of the labor force:

Ddu ucchie t' à dduchiàte (two eyes looked at you in envy) / *Tre sante t' à jutate* (three saints helped you) / *Occhie di zitelle* (spinster's eye) / *Va pe la terre* (travels the land) / *Ucchie di maritate* (bride's eye) / *Va pe li case* (travels houses) / *lu nome de lu Padre, Fijole* (in the name of the Father, the Son) / *e Spirite Sante* (and the Holy Spirit); *Malucchie e quirnicille* (evil eye and horns) / *Crepe l'ammidie* (ill envy) / *E schiatte lu malucchie* (and destroy the evil eye).¹³

The evil eye can be avoided by wearing horn-shaped – namely phallic – amulets, or other types of lucky charms: the number thirteen; index and little fingers making horns; a small hunchback man; a horseshoe; a broom. People think that the phallus, the organ of fertility, is the most powerful magic symbol in fighting off the evil eye. However, when someone is the victim of the evil eye, a charm is the only way to undo the spell.

¹² Formula heard in the provinces of Chieti, Pescara, Teramo, and in Molise; Giancristofaro 1971, 91-93.

¹³ I heard this formula in the province of Chieti; Giancristofaro 1971, 94.

3. THE ART OF CONTROLLING SOCIETY: CHARMS AS A “WIDER SOCIAL TEXT” IN VERNACULAR LANGUAGE

Those who believe in supernatural forces think they can be dominated thanks to secret gestures and words¹⁴. In Abruzzo, people believe that handing down these methods from one generation of charmers to the next takes place at particular times of the year, namely at midnight on Christmas Eve or on the Eve of Saint John (June 23rd). Only on these occasions, corresponding to the winter and summer solstices, can a new charmer be created thanks to a spell spoken by the older charmer¹⁵. There is a preference for white magic aimed at making dreams come true and at beneficial goals, such as casting out the evil eye and treating illnesses. Only a small part of these arts aims to cause the death of people (black magic). Indeed, the evil eye is the gaze cast by those who are envious, or feel hatred and resentment, but it only intends to bring bad luck and malaise, not to cause the death of the victim. This characteristic of the evil eye is also documented by many other scholars¹⁶.

The belief in the evil eye is widespread throughout the Western world and has intrigued many scholars. Italian ethnologist Clara Gallini has moved beyond the psychological explanation and argues that the evil eye is a social norm through which the group affirms its authoritarian and punitive function as its right. In short, in a conservative society, where we must all be equal, the evil eye and its negative consequences are a punishment for those who seek to rise above equality or have not shared their good fortune with the community¹⁷. Indeed, the evil eye does not affect those who are poor, but rather those who feel fortunate for a lovely family, an expensive car, a beautiful home, good earnings, or good health. This belief is not irrational, therefore, because it meets the cultural needs of people and groups.

The characteristics of this belief are connected to the old peasant world, closely linked in Italy to the economic and social structure of the farmstead. Exploring the reasons for the establishment, persistence, and local diffusion of these magic practices, our focus offers some general considerations on Catholicism and southern Italy. The evil eye can

¹⁴ Magic includes agents, acts, and representations: the individual performing the magic acts is called a *magician*; we define as *magical representations* the ideas and beliefs that correspond to magic acts; and the acts are called *rites of magic* (Mauss - Hubert 1903).

¹⁵ Giancristofaro 1971.

¹⁶ Among others, Gallini 1973 and Dundes 1981.

¹⁷ Gallini 1973.

be attributed to the sphere of fertility and most probably originated in ancient times, from pre-Christian agricultural cults, as the ancient amulets (eyes, horns and fingers) found in the Abruzzo archaeological sites demonstrate¹⁸. Similar rituals and beliefs have also been studied and described in other regions in the world¹⁹. We might then place this practice in a broader context in terms of the anthropological research into religion and holiness over a century or more²⁰. In Italy, an important reference could be *The Land of Remorse (La Terra del Rimorso*, first Italian edition 1961), a classic work by Ernesto De Martino, the founding figure of Italian cultural anthropology. Based on fieldwork conducted in southern Italy in 1959, the study deals with the phenomenon of “tarantism” in Puglia, a form of possession related to the belief in the bite of a mythical tarantula and its ritual cure in the “taranta dance”. Most of those suffering from this type of possession were women, and official medical science tended to believe this was a result of female physical and mental weakness. As both an ethnologist and classically trained religious historian, the author reviews field data with a historical analysis. The result is a compassionate and compelling account of this kind of belief, which no longer appears as mere mental illness or as a survival of irrationality, but as a product of a cultural history defined from above, endowed with its own forms of rationality. In particular, the culture of southern Italy was one of violence toward and repression of women, and this triggered an erratic reaction in every female. Over the centuries, that type of culture developed a holistic rehabilitation of mind and body that expressed itself in the spider (taranta) syndrome and in the magical rite of removing the venom through a lengthy collective dance performed in the sanctuary of San Paolo, in Galatina, province of Lecce. In Italy, all historical and anthropological studies of magic have been deeply conditioned by the interpretations of De Martino, who was Clara Gallini’s mentor. He also published *The World of Magic (Il mondo magico*, 1948) and *Magic: A Theory from the South (Sud e magia*, 1959), investigating the ethical condition of the population and the persistence of beliefs in the modern age.

The rigidity of the cultural framework of rural Italy within which magic flourishes explains why this kind of treatment or this solution to

¹⁸ Papi 2006.

¹⁹ Belief in the evil eye is documented in Greece, Germany, Spain, France, Russia, and also in the Balkans, India, Israel, and the Middle East (Elworthy 1895; Van Gennep 1943; Dundes 1981).

²⁰ For example, Elworthy 1895 and Van Gennep 1909.

human suffering was not useful in improving the conditions of suffering people or in driving them to seek a new sense of their existence, leaving them in a perpetual lack of awareness²¹. The goal of this cultural and religious system is to adjust disrupted and painful emotional elements, restoring in people their physical strength to work and survive under the protective value of popular and local religion – in other words, of spells. Other Italian authors, above all Alfonso M. Di Nola, point out that the population still has a conservative vision of saints, similar to the medieval vision of the saint-healer widespread before the Counter-Reformation. Therefore, the evil eye belief still requires the evocation of the saints. This symbolic dialog with the saints and the fact that many positive events like healings are still attributed to saints explain why the expectation of miracles – namely the special intervention through a saint – persists in southern Italy²².

4. THE ALPHABET OF MAGIC FROM THE PAST TO THE PRESENT

The need for certainties crucial for living life with the right kind of optimism fosters the belief in horoscopes and evil eyes. Today, most of the population is superstitious, but there is an increase in “professional magic” based on conjuring up the devil and breaking down the relationship with homespun white magic²³. White magic continues to be practiced in homes and among families, and while the charm retains its magical function, it also fuses with prayer. Obviously, the spell is cast on natural forces, while prayer excludes this kind of domination because it is a simple supplication to a saint. However, even charms to cast out the evil eye invoke saints (Virgin Mary, Holy Trinity, Jesus), so it is a kind of prayer to a higher power that is called in to help people in the fight against evil.

Sometimes the charm formula for healing ailments (upset stomach, rheumatism), apart from the evil eye, appears as a short rhyming tale explaining that Mary or Jesus suffered the same illness and they recovered. In the house, when the charmer repeats the story, she transmits a benefit to the victim of evil, who feels better because of the symbolic effectiveness

²¹ Crapanzano 2005.

²² Di Nola 1976.

²³ Di Nola 1987.

of the ritual, as identified by Lévi Strauss²⁴. In the past, the Church condemned these practices and those who practiced them ended up at stake, but today there is more tolerance of folk use of saint names and the mixture of magical formulas and religious invocations²⁵.

Even today, magic is a means of addressing what impacts our existence and triggers a crisis. People are troubled by financial loss, an accident, a quarrel, a broken heart, or a minor illness, and they blame the evil eye for these events, but what they truly want is to change the situation. The documentation I collected in 2008-18 with the help of my university students shows that the belief in the evil eye is still very much alive, and that each day in a home somewhere, someone is removing the evil eye from children and grandchildren. My university students, mostly women, told me they sought a charmer to cast out the evil eye when they broke up with a boyfriend or failed an exam. The charm was uttered by the grandmother or an elderly family member, and they agreed to try it, feeling better after the ritual.

The formula has the same traditional incipit as collected in 1965-70 (see in preceding pages Giancristofaro 1971), that is, *Du ucchie t' à ucchiate* (two eyes looked at you in envy) / *Tre Sante t' à iutate* (three saints helped you) or *la Madonna t' à iutate* (Our Lady helped you). The informants were chiefly women, and they specified that the words cannot be spoken casually and must be part of a magic rite. They also emphasize that the ritual must be carried out sitting around the kitchen table, with a white plate, in candlelight, and in silence. In short, people still take this belief very seriously. A first-year student in 2017 told me she could perform a less powerful charm to stop hiccoughs by using these words:

Sijjòzze, sijjòzze (hiccoughs, hiccoughs) / *vatten'abballe pe' lu pozze* (fall down the well) / *Se m'aiute Gesù* (if Jesus helps me) / *lu sijjòzze non viè cchiù* (the hiccoughs go away).

²⁴ After Charcot, Lévi Strauss also investigated social, psychological, and physiological mechanisms of healing (Lévi-Strauss 1949). I also mention here the approach of Actor-Network Theory (ANT), where everything in the social and natural worlds exists in constantly shifting networks of relationships (Latour 1993).

²⁵ Of course, in Italy the historical and anthropological study of these phenomena of popular religion found in southern Italy (Di Nola 1976; De Rosa 1978, and many others) was conditioned by the fundamental work of Ernesto De Martino: next to the *Land of Remorse*, we mention *Sud e magia* (1959), where De Martino investigates the dramatic social and ethical condition of the population and embarked on the study of folklore, popular Catholicism, and the persistence of belief in magic.

The student says that the moment of the spell is sacred and cannot be interrupted. The reference to saints and Christian mythology legitimizes this – white – magic for good aims, and serves to remove evil, not to cause it. She says the spell must be done by sitting around the kitchen table, in silence, and making the sign of the cross with closed scissors in front of the throat of the person suffering the hiccoughs. But she also knows a short charm to stop general bad luck that precludes people from passing exams at university:

Du ucchie t’ à ucchiate (two eyes looked at you in envy) / *la Madonna t’ à iutate* (Our Lady helped you) / *lu malucchie va ‘rrete e* (the evil eye goes back and) / *nne vva cchiù avante* (no longer goes forward) / *l’esame va ‘nienze* (examinations go ahead) / *in nome di li Sante* (in the name of the saints).

She is an arts student and hopes to receive as soon as possible (maybe next Christmas) the power from her grandmother to remove the evil eye in persistent cases and to develop the magic skills as a career parallel to that of teaching. She says that most of the people who request this kind of help are women and also that women are particularly susceptible to the evil eye because they are weaker. She explains this weakness by making reference to the “empty nature” of a female body. Of course, she is not paid by the girlfriends who benefit from her white magic skills but she feels privileged in a social role – the *fatarella* (little sorceress) – still admired in local culture. She declares that through this power, she can be of use to her girlfriends and, in future, to her children and grandchildren.

All anthropological records cited in this article also show that this technique is practiced by elderly women within their family group. The work of these charmers is free. These women enhance their prestige in their social in-group through their skills in removing the evil eye. By performing a caring act for a person, based on protection and interdependence between older and younger generations, the evil eye ideology is handed down and is still very much alive.

5. CONCLUSION: PEOPLE WHO BELIEVE IN MAGIC

Observation as a participant of these very intimate situations is quite a challenge and researchers still have a long way to go. As we have already said, a comparison of folk documentation from 1965-70 with present research highlights a constant element for the transmission of this magical credo: women. While a male (the *magaro*) exercising magical arts is paid

as a professional²⁶, women practice the skill mainly in the family circle and do not ask to be paid except with kudos. In this way, women convey belief in the evil eye to other women and repeatedly endorse the concept that women are especially susceptible to magic.

In the anthropological records presented in this article, the reason women are more likely to be victims of evil eye and possession is attributed to their “empty nature”. In the minds of these women, a man has substance, while the woman is an empty shell and this void can only be filled by male substance, as often happens in gendered beliefs²⁷. Older women pass down these gender notions and the belief that the supernatural affects females. In so doing, they benefit from the increased respect of the younger generation. Women, however, tend to take fewer risks and engage in the corporal care of other family members in their social group. If they do not do this, they are seen as dangerous²⁸. In short, through a transversal perspective suggested by recent research²⁹, this comparison of ethnographic data highlights gender inequalities which, in theory and in practice, confine the role of women to a position of cultural subordination, struggling to achieve emancipation.

Magic rites are used for health, love, or money issues because the loss of any of these aspects of an object of desire brings frustration and anguish. Nonetheless, today’s aspiration to govern reality has spawned a new black magic business that brings huge earnings. In Abruzzo, magicians, fortune-tellers and card-readers (often men) advertise their services on the web and on television. Their services, which they define as “scientific”, develop dependence and malaise in their clients, who are unaware of the purely psychological effects of the magic and are thus incapable of seeking different solutions to their problems. In short, among many groups primary orality related to magic belief still survives through women, and it is women who hand it down in the family, engaging younger females. This mnemonic and empathic thought³⁰ is able to express and strengthen relationships among people with a rite of care focused on solving problems of the present but can have a negative impact on the future, both on the life of individuals and on gender equilibrium and equality.

²⁶ Giancristofaro 1971, 180-183.

²⁷ Héritier 1996.

²⁸ Douglas 1966.

²⁹ Among others, Dill - Zambrana 2009.

³⁰ Ong 1982.

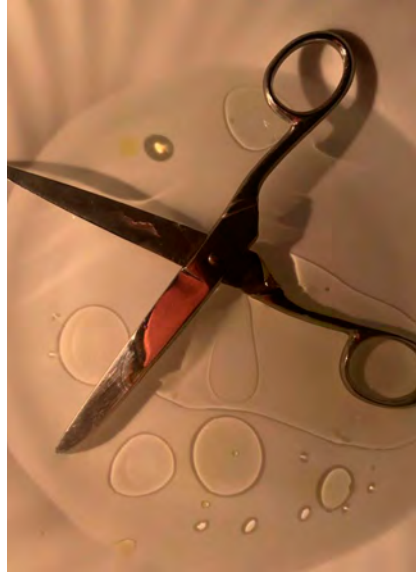


Figure 1. – Left: A woman takes the evil eye out of her niece by telling traditional formulas.
Photo made by Lia Giancristofaro in Abruzzo, 2017.

Figure 2. – Right: The woman drops oil into a dish full of water, and, reciting the holy formulas, she simulates cutting the large drops (evil eye) with scissors.
Photo made by Lia Giancristofaro in Abruzzo, 2017.

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