



‘Phij, phij, phij  
sar sig kerav, avka sig te naš’ol.’

‘Yuck, yuck, yuck, while I am doing this, may (all evil) quick disappear’

2.3

## The evil eye – Jakhendar

Markéta Hajská

The belief in *jakhendar* ‘the evil eye’ is widespread among the Roma in Slovakia. It represents an example of magical thinking which is common still today. Curse by the evil eye is generally caused by the look of a person during which evil forces are transmitted through his or her eyes to the affected person who as a result feels weak or uneasy. These signs of being cursed are diagnosed during a ritual by means of *jagalo paňi* ‘coal water’ which is prepared by the ritual leader. The cursed person is then ritually treated with the coal water. The cause, the symptoms and the treatment of the curse by the evil eye vary widely from locality to locality. However, the main characteristics of the curse as well as the consecutive stages of the following ritual are the same.

### INTRODUCTION

Among the Roma in Slovakia, the belief in the evil eye and its treatment with so-called coal water (in Romani *jagalo paňi* ‘lit. fire water’) is widespread still today. It is commonly practiced not only among the Slovak and Hungarian Roma but also among the Vlach Roma.

The belief in the evil eye is a form of magical thinking which is present in various cultures of the world. For instance, Hamsa or otherwise called the Hand of Fatima is a palm-shaped amulet used especially among the Arabs in North Africa as a protection against the evil eye. In the Middle East, on the other hand, we find an eye-shaped amulet called Nazar with the same protective function. The belief in the evil eye is also widespread in Latin and Central America as well as in the Mediterranean region among others. In East Slovakia, where the phenomenon has been most thoroughly described by researchers, the evil eye is feared also in the majority population. In fact, this practice among the Roma most likely originates in the dominant, Slovak, culture. The belief in the evil eye among the ethnic Slovaks is, however, rather rare today. It is maintained especially among old women and in the countryside. In general, many ethnic Slovaks in the villages would deny that they believe in such superstition, while claiming that only the Roma believe in it. Similarly, the Roma who are well integrated in the majority society declare that they do not practice the ritual related to the evil eye. In fact, the opposite is often true.

The ritual act of magical healing may manifest in various forms among the Roma in Slovakia. Its specific forms usually

vary from village to village. Still, we may identify certain shared or similar features of this practice which will be described in the following sections.

### SOURCE OF THE EVIL EYE

The most common way to be cursed by the evil eye is through looking. Accordingly, in some localities the cursed person is referred to in Slovak as the one who *stane z očí* ‘becomes from the eye’ or *pride z očí* ‘comes from the eye’. The Slovak phrase *z očí* ‘from the eyes’ is generally used in the abbreviated forms *zoč* or *zoči* and this is where the Romani term *jakhendar* ‘lit. from the eyes; the evil eye’ (also called *jakhaliben*) originates. A person can harm simply by looking in a strange way at another person, either deliberately or unwillingly. The evil look is often accompanied by the inner feelings of envy, hostility or desire; or, in other words, by feelings that the person is hiding from the outside world. For instance, if a person likes very much a baby or a beautiful girl, he can harm them simply by staring at them.

An evil eye may easily pose a danger especially in a crowd of people. It may happen that a person whom everyone is looking at, because he or she is talking or for some other reason, has been cursed by someone. The evil eye also represents a danger during trips away from home where the person is surrounded by many unknown people. In this regard, visits to unfamiliar Roma are considered to be dangerous, especially if it is a meeting of many people. For the same reasons, shopping

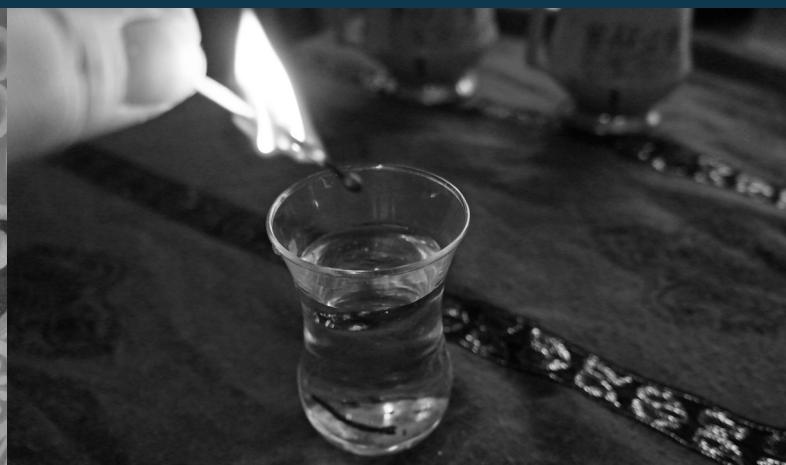
## III. 1

A baby with a red ribbon on the left wrist. The ribbon is used as a protection against the evil eye, since it distracts the evil look from the baby and so keeps the evil forces away. The Romani name for the red ribbon is *indralori* which is derived from the adjective *indralo* 'sleepy'.



## III. 2

Coal water made of water and burnt matches.



in the city may be also perceived as dangerous. Some people who are said to have strange eyes very often harm others. They are permanently seen as potential possessors of the evil eye, irrespective of their intentions.

This mysterious bewitchment is not always connected to the look by an evil eye. It is equally possible that a person harms others by an unwanted attention or an excessive compliment which is contrary to the person's true intentions. For instance, a person compliments the clothes of another person although he does not like them. There are also phenomena referred to as the evil eye which are directly related to contact magic. Contact magic is a form of magic that involves some kind of physical contact between the parties. If someone strokes with an evil intention, for instance, the beautiful hair of a young girl, this may result in that the girl's hair will fall out. Even such cases can be prevented by the coal water (see in the next sections).

The victims of the evil eye are most commonly children. This may happen if a stranger looks at the child while breastfed or when the mother interrupts the breastfeeding for the third time. The evil eye may harm the child even while he or she is asleep. The Roma believe that one should not stare at small children, praise them or otherwise pay them too much attention, since it could bring the evil eye forth. Particularly vulnerable to the evil eye is a child who has not yet been baptized. In some Romani communities, the adults try not to expose small babies to the eyes of other Roma. When they show the baby someone, this person spits out three times: *Phij, phij, phij!* 'Yuck, yuck, yuck!' In this way, he or she protects the unbaptized child from being cursed.

But not only humans are threatened by the evil eye. The Roma believe that the curse can fall on plants or animals too, including domestic animals. Similar practice is found among the ethnic Slovaks: many old grandmothers wash or pour coal water on their sick cow or other domestic animals against the evil eye.

## SIGNS OF THE EVIL EYE

An unmistakable sign that someone is cursed by the evil eye is if he or she becomes sick, weak or irritated from no apparent reason, or if he or she wants to sleep suddenly, is spiritless, vomits or hiccoughs while feverish, is dizzy or has head-ache or stomach-ache.

In case of children, the most frequent symptoms of *jakhendar* are fever, insomnia and lack of appetite. Further symptoms in case of small children include a bloated belly, heavy breath, bluish neck and groin.

## COAL WATER – JAGALO PAŇI

The occurrence of symptoms described above do not necessarily indicate that the person has been harmed by the evil eye. This issue must be clarified in the first place. There are basically two types of rituals which aim at finding out whether the symptoms are caused by evil forces or not. Both rituals are very similar and use the same symbolic elements which are repeated throughout the ritual. The ritual act starts with a fire which will turn the wood, the symbol of matter, into coal. It is followed by the water, into which the coal falls. Consequently, the water is considered to be sacred and have a healing power. Moreover, when the coal falls to the bottom of the cup, it is considered to have a supernatural origin. In fact, exactly the part of the ritual when the coal spontaneously sinks in the fluid is the most convincing to the participants of the ritual, because under normal circumstances a burnt carbon stock floats on the water surface. There is also a cross, the Christian symbol of the struggle against the evil, as well as the invocation of holiness, a positive power, into this struggle. The ritual is everywhere accompanied by various magic formulas and other ritualized speech acts. Finally, the magical power of the number three is widely used during the ritual: three matches, three crosses, three times to wash, and three times to repeat and so on.

## III. 3

A child is diagnosed by the evil eye during a ritual. During the treatment of the evil eye the wrist of a child is washed and massaged by coal water.



## III. 4

The black cup which is placed upside down aside from the other glasses and cups are used exclusively during the ritual of diagnosis of the evil eye. It is strictly forbidden to use it for other purposes.



According to the first type of the ritual, a pot of hot or boiling water is needed into which a certain amount of coals are thrown one by one. This can be considered a more archaic method of diagnosis of the evil eye.

When there is a suspicion of the evil eye, clean water is taken, preferably fresh from the well. Regarding the water, it is especially important that no one drank from it. Someone begins to throw the coals into the water while a participant of the ritual is counting negatively: *aňi jekh, aňi duj, aňi trin...* ‘neither one, nor two, nor three...’ Elsewhere, the negative counting is even reverse: *aňi eňa, aňi ochto, aňi ešta...* ‘neither nine, nor eight, nor seven...’ According to some Roma, the live coals should be thrown into the pot with an upturned knife or the hand. If the coals fall to the bottom of the pot, it means that the person has been indeed harmed by the evil eye, and therefore he or she must be treated with the coal water in order to ward off the curse. The more coals fall to the bottom, the more the person is cursed. In some localities, the Roma make a cross by means of two straws which are placed over the pot, and the coals are thrown into the water through this cross. The number of coals used in the ritual varies from family to family. The most common number is three or nine.

The second type of the ritual is a simplified version of the first: Instead of hot water, cold water is used. In some places there are no restrictions on the ritual purity of the water; for instance, it does not matter if it is not completely fresh. Instead of coals matches can also be used and instead of a pot a plastic cup. Nevertheless, there are restrictions on the ritual purity of the cup. It is washed both before and after the ritual and it should not be used for any other purpose. Shortly before the ritual, the cup is filled two times with water and emptied. After the cup is filled for the third time, the water is left in it. The number of matches ranges from three to twelve. Similarly to the treatment with coals, the number of matches is most commonly three or three times three, that is nine. In some Romani communities, the number of matches corresponds to the degree of curse. However, it must always be a multiple of three, that is three, six or nine.

The matches are gradually fired before throwing them into the water. The ritual leader must proceed with care by burning the matches completely. Often it is important that the matches are lighted from each other: When the first match is getting burnt down, it is used to light the second one, then the third and the fourth one. All matches are thrown into the water after extinction. In some localities, only the burnt parts of the match are thrown to the water, so the unburnt ends are broken off.

If the matches fall to the bottom of the cup, the person is said to be cursed. Even a single match which fell to the bottom can be a sign of the evil eye. However, if all the matches sink, it is considered to be an instance of a strong and dangerous curse.

The ritual of throwing the matches into the water is accompanied by a ritualised speech act. Meanwhile the matches are thrown to the water, the ritual leader recites a magic formula such as *sar kerav avka sig te naš'lol* ‘while I am doing this, may (all evil) quick disappear’ or *sar kerav sig te predžal* ‘while I am doing this, may (all evil) quick go away’. Naturally, there are several local variants of this magic formula. In some Romani families, the Lord’s Prayer is prayed instead, or yet elsewhere the ritual murmuring of the word ‘saint, saint, saint’. It is also a common practice that both the ritual leader and the cursed person is completely silent during the whole ritual which is only interrupted by the ritual leader when reciting the magic formula.

Earlier ethnographic literature mentions also other ways of diagnosis of the evil eye. For instance, the patient was washed with herbal infusion. The person was said to be cursed if a kind of layer made of skin pieces was formed on the surface of the water by which the patient was washed. Other method involved the cooking of three pinches of salt, three live coals and three crusts of bread. Elsewhere, the number of ingredients was three times more, that is nine pinches of salt, nine live coals and nine crusts of bread. If all these ingredients sank to the bottom of the pot, it was a clear sign of the evil eye. There was an especially complicated procedure which involved bringing of water

III. 5

In 2004, a Romani woman from Bystrany (Slovakia) describes the ritual which is carried out in order to diagnose the evil eye.

(from Znamenáčková 2006, p. 47)

*Thoves o švabl'ika, o paňi začhungardes andro poharis: 'phij, phij, phij sar sig kerav, avka sig te naš'ol.' No akana so gines jekh švabl'ikos, sar keres: 'sar čhivav avka sig lake te naš'ol', 'sar sig čhivav avka sig lake te naš'ol'. Pregines ole švabl'ika, deve' razi, čhingeres andre kole spodki, kole spodki, ča o koncovki. Sar bešen tele andro paňi, ta koda znameňinel, hoj hin leske keci dženededar. Napríklad ačhol andro paňi tel o poharis, pro spodkos ačhol šov, pandž, štar, trin ta gines tuke: aňi jekh, aňi duj, aňi trin, aňi štar, aňi pandž, aňi šov, aňi ešta, aňi ochto, aňi eňa, aňi deš.*

You put the matches into a cup of water and spit into it: 'Yuck, yuck, yuck, while I am doing this, may (all evil) quick disappear'. So now you tell the magic formula for each match, as you are throwing them into the water: 'while I am doing this, may (all evil) quick disappear from her'. You tell the magic formula for each match, which means nine times. Then you break down the head, the ends of the matches, and throw them to the water. As many matches sink to the bottom of the cup as many people cursed the person. So for example, there will be six, five, four or three matches in the bottom of the cup. So you say: neither one, nor two, nor three, nor four, nor five, nor six, nor seven, nor eight, nor nine.

secretly which was then placed on a large fire. As many persons were suspected of harming by the evil eye, so many coals were thrown into the water. While throwing the coals, the ritual leader said the name of a suspected person: If the coal sank, it indicated that this person was indeed the one who had the evil eye. At the end of the ritual, the water was poured on a dog. There were also other practices to find out whether the person is harmed by *jakhendar* that do not involve any of the symbolic elements described above such as the water or the fire. For instance, the Roma took a sieve which was turned around by means of a knife. According to the movement of the sieve, namely which direction or at which word it stopped, it was determined whether the person had been cursed by a man, a woman or a child. None of these practices is attested today.

#### THE RITUAL LEADER

It is of utmost importance who is the person that performs the ritual. In some Romani settlements, the cursed person him or herself is the one who leads the ritual. The Roma believe that if some other person carries out the treatment, the ritual may lose its power. In contrast to it, in other Romani communities the ritual must be performed by someone else than the cursed person, usually by an older, experienced, woman. In case of small children, the ritual is led by their mother or grandmother. The ritual may also be performed by a man, though it is rather rare. Irrespective of the fact who is the leader of the ritual, it is important that the whole ritual is performed by a single person. In some localities, the healer remains silent during the ritual, while elsewhere she or he recites magic formulas. Depending on the local variant of the procedure, the ill person remains either passive during the ritual while the ritual practices are performed by the leader or he or she must be actively involved at some stage of the ritual.

#### THE TREATMENT

Treatment of the evil eye follows immediately after the diagnosis. The so-called coal water made of coals or matches has the principal role in the treatment. The coal water is applied on different body parts of the ill person. The purpose of treatment is

to clear the ill person by means of the coal water from the evil power. Similarly to the diagnosis of the evil eye, the treatment has different local variants.

The treatment itself can be usually divided into five phases. It should be noted, however, that not all phases are present in all Romani communities. The first phase of the treatment involves drinking from the *jagalo paňi*. This phase occurs in the overwhelming majority of Romani communities. In most cases, the patient has to drink only a little bit from the water. This act may be regarded as a symbolic drinking. In some Romani communities, the patient is asked to drink three spoonfuls of this water. While the water is used for treatment, the coals and matches are still in the glass. There are also localities where the ritual leader takes them out from the water and throws each match to a different corner of the room. Following, the ill person must drink all the coal water. At some Romani families, the whole glass of coal water must also be drunk if a stomach-ache is the symptom of being cursed.

The second phase of treatment is closely linked to the third. The second phase consists in dipping the fingers into the remaining coal water while the third phase in making the sign of cross on oneself. Most often, the ill person himself (or elsewhere the healer) dips two fingers of his right hand into the coal water and either washes certain body parts with it or makes a sign of cross on these body parts. By these body parts or points are massaged, the healer recites one of the above mentioned magic formulas (*aňi jekh, aňi duj, aňi trin...*; *sar kerav avka sig te naš'ol*; etc.) The most common body parts massaged are the temples, forehead, wrist, neck, or a certain point around the heart, under the knees or behind the ears. In many Romani families, the healer dips his hands again into the water and makes a sign of cross behind the neck of the patient or on his forehead. The most common magic formula recited meanwhile is: 'In the name of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.' The crossing is done on the mentioned body parts either once or three times. In some localities, the patient rinses his face a little bit with the same water. However, most often the eyes are rinsed: *O jakha nekbuter, bo oda le jakhendar hin kada jakhaliben*. 'The eyes (must be rinsed) the most, because the curse by the evil eye comes from the eyes.'

The fourth phase consists in the pouring out of the remaining coal water. It is poured out either on the threshold or

## III. 6

Belief in the evil eye is widespread in various cultures, including in various Romani groups. Looking at the Romani multi-dialectal lexical database, we find expressions related to the belief in the evil eye in many Romani dialects, examples of which are listed in the table. All these expressions are based on the Romani noun *jakh* 'eye'. Among the Vlach

Roma in Slovakia even the term for the coal water is *jakhálo páji* which translates as 'eye water', instead of *jagalo páji*. Other expressions related to the curse by the evil eye in Slovak Vlach Romani include *del jakhálo* 'to give so. the evil eye' and *jakhálo -j dino* 'he is cursed'.

(from ROMLEX: <http://romani.uni-graz.at/romlex/>)

CRIMEAN ROMANI	GURBET ROMANI	KALDERAŠ ROMANI	SEPEČIDES ROMANI	WELSH ROMANI
<i>čhel jakhaluno</i>	<i>del-pe jakh</i>	<i>del jakhalo</i>	<i>lela jakhatar</i>	<i>basavi jakh</i>
to put the evil eye on sb.	to cast the evil eye	to give so. the evil eye	to get the evil eye	the evil eye

in front of it, on the door frame or on the hinges at the door, or on the wall of the house. The water must be poured three times in each corner of the room while the magic formula is repeated by the ritual leader (*sar čhivav, avka sig te naš'ol* 'while I am pouring it, may (all evil) quick disappear'). This practice is to symbolize the protection from evil forces, preventing them from returning into the house. If there is no water left, this phase is obviously skipped. After the cup is emptied, it is placed upside down in the corner of the room accompanied by the formula: *sig obracinav, avka sig te naš'ol* 'as quick as I am turning it around, may (all evil) disappear'. Until the morning, the cup must stay upside down in the same place, and so avoiding the symptoms caused by the evil eye to return. The cup used in the ritual is placed aside from all other cups and no one can drink from it.

According to some Roma, the last, fifth, phase of the treatment involves sleep. To complete the ritual in this way is essential, especially in case of a strong curse or children. The healed person should go to bed immediately after the ritual and he should be asleep for some time. The sleep guarantees that all the symptoms of the evil eye disappear, that the body is filled with energy and regenerates. It represents a transition from the ritual to the ordinary life. The healed person wakes up clean, without any symptoms, usually in a good mood. By this time, the other participants of the ritual are occupied by everyday activities, the ritual is forgotten, and there is no need to talk about it.

The treatment of the evil eye as attested recently by researchers differs significantly from that described in older ethnographic texts. However, they share a similar structure of the healing process, that is, the treatment of a body part with coal water. There are reports on that the ill person had to wash his or her body with the coal water or directly take a bath in it, especially in case of small children. The ritual of washing was often provided repeatedly. Nevertheless, in the majority of cases it was sufficient to wash only certain important body parts. For instance, the mouth of the child was washed out by hand which had been dipped into coal water, followed by washing other body parts. Elsewhere, the ill person was massaged with the coal water. Important was, as mentioned before, rinsing of the eyes, especially in case of children because the illness is believed to be transmitted by the eyes. As a part of the treatment, the eyes were wiped with the underside of the skirt which was previously

soaked into the coal water. Elsewhere, the eye was washed with the own urine or healed by three times spitting into it.

In general, we can observe a degradation and considerable simplification of the ritual as compared to earlier descriptions. Despite of the fact that the recent treatment of the evil eye shares several features with the earlier treatment methods, the differences are striking. Today, the preparation of the coal water itself takes much less time and effort than before. In many localities, the coal water was prepared from herbal infusion, or at least from boiling water. Today, even cold water is sufficient.

The ritual had more sacral character, and it often consisted of more phases each based on different ritual practices. For instance, if the coal water did not help, other practices were used. This multiple way of treatment of the evil eye is, however, rare today. An exception is, for instance, the Romani settlement of Ortuťová in Slovakia where also the coal water is prepared in a most traditional way, meaning with nine coals. In this Romani community, if the treatment with coal water does not have any effect, each member of the family is cut off a lock of hair which is then placed on a plate of live coals and the ill person is fumigated by its smoke. According to the local Roma, if nothing else, this practice always works.

#### PROTECTION AGAINST THE EVIL EYE

The evil eye can certainly be prevented. In general, there are three different ways to do it. The first, perhaps the most widespread, means of prevention is to attach a red ribbon (Romani *indralóri*) around the wrist. This red ribbon is so eye-catching that it has the power to attract the gaze of the evil eye and eliminate it.

Protective practices that are used among the ethnic Slovaks in the countryside work on a similar principle. For instance, they hang colorful decorative ribbons in the front door. These are intended to avoid the evil forces to enter the house. Sitting with crossed legs is another method of prevention which is used mainly in a larger company where there is a permanent threat of the evil eye. There is a similar prevention used among the Roma in Zborov which consists in keeping the hands pinched. Crossing parts of the body carries also the motif of the cross, the holiness which stops the evil forces. However, it may also result in

the blocking of the flow of internal power and armors against the external powers.

Another common means of prevention is to wear clothes inside out. Mostly it is sufficient to have only the socks or the T-shirt inside out, but some people protect themselves by wearing several garments inside out at the same time. Once again, the principle of ‘turning’ has a symbolic importance: the coals are thrown to the water by an upturned knife, the negative counting in a reverse order during the preparation of the coal water, or when the eyes are washed by the underside of the skirt. It is obvious that there is an intention to use something distinctive or unusual, all of which have the same purpose: The negative gaze (i.e. the evil eye) is attracted to another object which, as a result, prevents the person from the curse. All these practices have the intention to stop the evil eye, to confuse it, to transfer it to something else, and so to ward off the attack.

#### IF THE EVIL EYE IS NOT DIAGNOSED

If the burnt matches or live coals do not sink and so remain floating at the water surface, it means that the physical difficulties of the patient are not caused by evil forces, by the evil look, but that his or her body is simply weakened: be it a cold, a consequence of poor diet, fatigue or alcohol consumption. In cases when the symptoms are not caused by the evil eye, the patient either recovers from himself or herself (because it is proved to be nothing serious) or he or she is cured with common pharmaceutical medicines and drugs.

It should be noted here that even the use of medicine is perceived in a particular way among the Roma. They are attributed some kind of magical power. It does not really matter

what kind of medicine is used, because all the pills have a similar magical power. Important are, however, the procedures connected to the use of the medicine. For example, the patient goes to bed after taking the medicine, tries to sleep awhile, but soon he or she gets up and devotes himself to his hobbies, just like in case of the treatment with coal water. Thus, the patient has a symbolic sleep which is considered to be sufficient. He or she gets up and feels healed. The belief in the medicine itself exceeds its actual function as the patient is absolutely convinced that the symptoms will be cured by the medicine.

The combination of medicine and alcohol is completely unacceptable for the Roma. They believe that the healing power of the medicine interferes with alcohol, irrespective of the type of medicine. For instance, it is strictly forbidden to have a swallow of beer even if only vitamin pills have been taken before by the patient. Thus, the use of pharmaceutical medicines represents a small ritual, the rules of which must be followed.

Most Roma perceive the treatment with coal water as a routine part of their health care. The numerous illnesses and other negative physical symptoms caused by the evil eye are seen as a specific illness which originates in supernatural power. The Roma thus disregard the fact that some of these illnesses may have been caused by organic disorders or diseases. Furthermore, as mentioned, the cursed person has to be ritually purified from the evil forces as much as the whole house where he or she lives.

The belief in the effectiveness of the ritual is widespread among the Slovak Roma. It also represents an integral part of the health care practices in Romani families which migrated several decades ago from the Romani settlements of East Slovakia to Czech cities and towns.

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