

# Birth and the Evil Eye in the Amazigh Culture in Morocco: The Case of Ayt Merghad

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**Abstract.** *During the last decades, many beliefs in the Moroccan culture have undergone profound changes. However, people's attitudes towards the evil eye as a destructive power have not changed that much. The belief in its notion is still a significant aspect of the Amazigh culture which is the concern of the present study. Therefore, this paper seeks to contribute to a better understanding of the phenomenon. On the one hand, with a special reference to the Ayt Merghad community, it provides a description of people's attitudes towards this notion in relation to pregnancy and birth. On the other hand, it attempts to shed light on the different practices used in order to remove the effect of the evil eye in the target community. It can be concluded, that education has played a significant role in the way the evil eye is perceived and dealt with. However, the belief in its harmful effect is deeply rooted in the Ayt Merghad's psyche.*

**Key Words:** The evil eye, Birth, The Amazigh culture, Education, Ayt Merghad.

## Introduction<sup>2</sup>

It has been noticed that certain superstitious beliefs are widespread in different cultures of the world. The evil eye is a case in point. In this regard, this paper seeks to contribute to a better understanding of the phenomenon. It tries to provide an account about the belief in such a notion within the Amazigh culture. A special focus is put on the evil eye in relation to pregnancy and birth among the Ayt Merghad community. From an ethnographic perspective, the researcher attempts to elicit the target community's attitudes towards the evil eye notion. The paper also discusses some of the methods used by the Ayt Merghad community to counteract the effect of the evil eye.

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2 The phonetic transcription adopted in the present study conforms to the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA). Geminate sounds are indicated by means of doubling the consonant. Emphatic sounds are indicated by means of a letter with a dot underneath.

### **Ayt Merghad: A Brief Overview**

Ayt Merghad is an Amazigh tribal group whose native language is Tamazight. The latter is a variety of the Amazigh language, which has been classified as descendant of the Afro-Asiatic branch. A close look at the history of Ayt Merghad shows that the community inhabited one of the most important cities in Morocco, namely Sijilmasa. Since the Middle Ages, the region has been called Tafilalet. The latter refers to the Southeast Morocco until the country's independence in 1956. After that, the region became known as Ksar Es-Souk Province which would later become Errachidia Province (Llahiane, 2004). Sijilmasa was founded in A.D. 757 by the Zennata Imazighen and flourished for 650 years. During the last two years of its existence, it was inhabited by approximately 30.000 people (Lightfoot & Miller, 1996).

Today, the territory of Ayt Merghad extends on a relatively vast area, located on the southern slope of the Eastern High-Atlas, which is situated in the south-east of Morocco. The majority of Ayt Merghad are located along the valleys of Ghéris and Ferkla in Errachidia. The latter is bordered by the province of Figuig to the east, Beni Mellal and Azilal and Khenifra to the west, Boulmane to the north and Algeria to the south.

### **Methodology**

An understanding of the issue investigated is assumed to be achieved through an ethnographic type of data which emerge from interviews and participant observation. Evidently, the task of eliciting the Ayt Merghad community's attitudes towards the evil eye and understanding the methods used to counteract its effect are made possible by constant participatory observation and interaction with members of the target culture. Participant observation and interviewing are considered almost universally the central and defining methods of ethnographic research (See, for example, Agar, 1996; Schensul et al., 1999; and Spardley, 1980).

In the present study, participant observation is a critical technique. Agar (1996) used participant observation as a cover term for all the observation and formal and informal interviewing in which anthropologists engage. DeWalt & DeWalt (2002:1) argue that *"participant observation is a method in which a researcher takes part in the daily activities, rituals, interactions, and events of a group of people as one of the means of learning the explicit and tacit aspects of their life routines and their culture"*.

Another data collection technique used in this study is the informal conversational interviewing. This in-depth interviewing is generally regarded as the most powerful tool for extracting data. This technique is considered the most open-ended approach to interviewing. It is also referred to as *"unstructured interviewing"* (Fontana & Frey 2000: 652). As Patton (2002:342) suggests, *"Informal conversational interview relies entirely on the spontaneous generation of questions in the natural flow of an interaction, often as a part of ongoing participant observation fieldwork"*. The interviews helped collect information on the basis of which the researcher has developed an understanding of the issue investigated.

### **Birth and the Evil Eye-related Practices among Ayt Merghad**

The belief in the destructive effect of the evil eye constitutes an important part of the Ayt Merghad culture.

There used to be a strong conviction among the Ayt Merghad community that this supernatural power was behind the high mortality rates among mothers and babies during and after delivery. Moreover, diseases used to be attributed to the evil eye or supernatural powers. It used to be very common for women giving birth to be assisted by a mid-wife. The latter used to have no formal training in health practices, but she acquired her skills through practice. Whenever she faced a complicated case, she would try to adapt her knowledge. In cases of failure, blame was never put on her; on the contrary, superstition would always be the culprit. A 58-year-old woman who has painful memories about her first and last pregnancy accepted to share her story.

*“kixtən llīy s udis txiṛij tʒabbut. ɕul majdi izran ar itʒəʒʒab itixitərt nəs. arij ttinin ajt taddart ad ləy iʒban inʒan afd si ffar. dima arij ttinin han tadist nnaɣ ixatərn da dʒəbbəd tīt. ajnna tbdə digi tziṛi, tyrajas təmyart innw i ʒttis nu rgaʒ innw, nna jwalʒə da tʒawan tiwtmin nna jran ad jarw. taga ugar n lʒəhd nəs afad uruy. tqqima ari tʒssar taʒbbut walajnni ur tqdi jaɖu. jussa yifi uzbar, imih ardi tʒən idamn. tnnajasn i ajt taddart hati ixssa ad dduy s sbitar fisaʒ. afan ninand sbitar n mulaj ʒli frif tʒassa jay tassaʒt n ubrid. ajnna ni nuwɖ ur iqqimi majd ntʒtaq. innaj uɖbib iɕniwn nna jllan g tdist innw mmtn. innajji hat ur imkin ad aruy bla lbarasjun. ur ijly winnaɣ g iyf ʒla hqqaf ur dʒin dkekiy yur uɖbib ajnna da ttaruy. ajdəy izran isbbəb i lmut n iɕniwn ig and ssabab ad ur jad ttaruy. luqt nnaɣ and jan ur ilamma tmttu nna jʒavən g tarwa walakin ruran majdi izran i tīt.”*

*“Thirty nine years ago, I was pregnant and my belly was too large, everybody was commenting on its size. The family members insisted on me to wear large clothes to hide it. They kept telling me that my belly was attractive and it might be targeted by the evil eye. With the first signs of delivery, my mother-in-law called my husband’s aunt, who used to assist women while giving birth. She did her best to help me. She kept pressing on my belly but in vain. The pain was unbearable, suddenly, I started bleeding; only then, did she inform the family members that I urgently needed to be taken to the hospital. It took us an hour to arrive to Moulay Ali Cherif Hospital; unfortunately, we were too late. The doctor told me that I was pregnant with twins but they are dead. He also said that it was not possible for me to give birth without a cesarean section. Of course, I did not know because I did not do any check up during my pregnancy. As a result of that incident, I lost the twins and all the hope of giving birth again. At that time, no one put the blame on the midwife; on the opposite everybody was hinting at the effect of the evil eye.”*

The belief in the evil eye and the Jinn still exists among Ayt Merghad. They are perceived as fatal forces that can destroy one’s life. Therefore, protection from their negative outcomes appears in many forms. In the past, Ayt Merghad used to resort to superstition to counteract these supernatural powers. An old woman states in a very careful tone:

*“annag tʒajd tʒəlmja, daṛrara mmans lbal məzjan. llan məddən nna mi xaxant waln. qbəl ad ddu ingbawn das ttassa g ufus ajffas lxiṛ nna gllan waqqajn d tkemmist n tisnt d lbarməl”*

*“When a baby was born, the mother should be very very cautious. Some people’s looks are harmful. Before the guests arrive, she should tie around the baby’s right hand a thread with beads and a small bag full of salt and harmal.”*

Another 64-year-old woman admits that Ayt Merghad believe that:

*“ajt rabbi ur da tətʒan tisnt, urad qarbən adyar nna g tlla. qbəl attatdʒt tasmja i wədduns, ihla ad yurs tʒəərst isɣ”ar (tisnt d lbarməl) qad tti həjdn.”*

*“The Jinn do not eat salt; they do not approach the place where you put it. Therefore, before you leave the baby on its own, it is good to place ‘isg’ar’ (salt and harmal) next to it as it will protect it.”*

Recently, education has affected the way the evil eye is being dealt with. Educated women consider religion an effective means to control the evil eye. Ayt Merghad assume that the protection from the evil eye can be achieved through seeking refuge in the Quran. A 25-year-old woman notes that: *“illa tiṭ, ttudkar g lqran, juhn attamz g tsalmjivin. ajnnay as ixssa ad yifsn tqar mma nsn çu sbab surat lfalag d nnas.”* *“The evil eye exists, it is mentioned in the Quran, and babies can be easily harmed. Therefore, the mother should read alfalak and annass chapters for her baby every morning.”* A 30-year-old woman also believes that people should seek protection in God; she states that:

*“bat ihla ad ttuyr ruqja çf tsmja. asagd tnçar mmans, lhazt tamzwarut na ttægga hjja aṭṭasəj taslmja ns tini:*

بِسْمِ اللّٰهِ اَرْقِيْكَ ، مِنْ كُلِّ شَيْءٍ يُؤْذِيْكَ ، مِنْ شَرِّ كُلِّ نَفْسٍ اَوْ عَيْنٍ حَاسِدٍ اللّٰهُ  
يَشْفِيْكَ، بِسْمِ اللّٰهِ اَرْقِيْكَ.“

*“It is very important to read ‘ruqja’ over a baby. When the mother gets up the first thing to do is to hold her baby and say:  
In the name of Allah I recite this ruqja over you. From anything which may harm you, from the evil of every soul and envious eye, Allah heals you. In the name of Allah I recite this ruqja on you.”*

However, using these methods to counteract the effect of the evil eye does not exclude the use of other superstitious methods. A 26-year-old woman argues that:

*“addag tçajid tsalmja ixssa aṭhawlt ad ur digg tamz tiṭ. ihla ad yifsn tçart surat lfalag d surat nnas d ihla ad as təgt lhərz. bati jəhla, da digg ttilint yir çə tçajat n lqurzan.”*

*“When a baby is born, you should do your best to protect him from the evil eye. It is good to read alfalag and annass chapters, but you can also use an amulet. It is good; it just includes a paper in which Quranic verses are written. If an amulet doesn’t benefit the baby, it won’t harm it.”*

She also adds that putting the Quran next to the baby is likely to protect it from the evil eye. A similar view is expressed by a 28-year-old woman describing Ayt Merghad’s attitudes towards the evil eye. She claims: *“sarabatan, mədn g dady suln da ssəxdamn id lhəzab d tisnt d lharəml afad ad ur tamz tiṭ g tsalmjivin nsən. walakin da ttugant ujdj n lumur s tufra. drusn mədn iṭtinin bat da tənt ttəggan.”* *“Frankly, people here are still using amulets, salt and harmel to protect their babies from the evil eye. However, these practices are used in total secrecy, and very few people admit their use.”* It can be inferred from the statements above that fear from the evil eye is deeply rooted in the Ayt Merghad’s psyche and cannot be easily overcome.

The evil eye beliefs and treatments among Ayt Merghad have not disappeared with urbanization and the access to modern medicine. The respondents claim that the evil eye affects babies and causes a sudden illness. This is a common sign after someone has visited the house. In such a case, the baby is taken to *lfqih* ‘a righteous old man’

or to *mmi ifilu* ‘a woman known for her capacity to remove the effect of the evil eye to neutralize its effect. In this regard, a 74-year-old woman confesses that:

*“awd nkekin s ixfinn, uruy taddun juwt tməttut, tnnaji ambarke maj tturut. imç daj tffəx, jayax ça Bil. iga amid isllim, ur izrrid ad ittəd. tddud mmi ifilu. tgras ifilu, tinay hat tin idamn nmun, hat dyi dyi ayd ikka wannawn digis inharn. tgas ifillu afad as tkes tit. da tñasi ifilu tyar yifs qol howa llah çrat tikkeal, tssutl tid i jiyf n tssəlmja, tasitid tssutl i tñdnt nəş təyras qol howa llah çrat tikkeal. luqt nna jks hat təkəs tit.”*

*“I, myself, gave birth, and a woman came to congratulate me. As soon as she left, the baby felt sick, he was pale and unable to suck my breast. ‘mmi ifilu’ (a woman known for her capacity to remove the effect of the evil eye) came. After she examined the baby using a thread, she told us that the baby was evil eyed by one of our female relative who had just left. In order to exorcise the baby, ‘mmi ifilu’ took the thread, and she recited al ixlas chapter three times. Then, she encircled the thread around the baby’s head. She, then, tied it to her toe and recited the same chapter three times. Once the thread got unfastened from the toe, it means that the effect of the evil eye has been removed.”*

Another old woman states that:

*“addag jay ça tasəlmja, dat nttaawij s yur ləqib. afad as tkes tit, dajgar imih n ffəb g<sup>w</sup> afa, daj bəddər ism n rabbi d lanbija d lanlija. addag iyra ça n ləajat n lquran, das jakka imma n tsəlmja lharç attī təg g waman tssərd zarsən tasəlmja”*

*“When a baby is sick as a result of the evil eye, we take it to ləsqib ‘a righteous old man’. To exorcise the evil eye from the body of the baby, he puts pieces of alum into fire, and then he pronounces the name of God, his Prophets and righteous ones, and recites verses from the Quran. He gives the mother an amulet and asks her to put it in some water and use the latter to wash the baby.”*

According to a 33-year-old-woman, a similar practice is still being used. She states that: *“mç tškka tməttut is tumz titt g tsəlmja nəəs, da tqar rruqja xf imih n waman tssird as zarsən.”* “If a woman suspects that her baby has been affected by the evil eye, she reads ‘ruqja’ over some water and uses the latter to wash her baby”. She justifies such practices by saying that ‘ruqja’ was used by the prophet (peace be upon him).

Another practice is still used by Ayt Merghad to treat the effect of the evil eye. People still believe that *lbəxur* ‘incense’ is efficient in healing the person affected by the evil eye. To exorcise the evil eye from the body of the patient, *lbəxur* made of *ffəbb* ‘alum’ is used because its transformation has a strong magical impact. It is assumed that as the alum is transformed by fire, the effect of the evil eye is neutralized.

Ayt Merghad strongly believe that the evil eye is a destructive power that can extremely harm or cause death to people. They also assume that pregnant women and babies are the most vulnerable to it. Indeed, the belief in the evil eye is not exclusive to the Ayt Merghad culture; different cultures of the world hold similar convictions. For example, in the Middle East:

*“the main general characteristics of the evil eye are that it relates to the fear of envy on the eyes of the beholder, and that its influence is avoided or counteracted by means of devices calculated to distract its attention and by practices of sympathetic magic.”* (Spooner 1976: 77)

Moreover, Spooner (1976) argues that the most vulnerable people to the evil eye are children, brides and

pregnant women. The evil eye is believed to cause sickness, fatigue and even death. A similar view is held by Shiloh (1961) who claims that the people targeted are mainly children and those who are extremely beautiful or healthy.

### **Conclusion**

The aim of the present paper has been to provide an account on the belief in the evil eye, as a significant aspect of the Ayt Merghad culture. Emphasis has been put on this destructive power with respect to pregnancy and birth. It has been shown that it has constituted a major factor in accounting for any malevolence. However, it has been concluded that women's education has largely influenced the way the evil eye is perceived and dealt with in the community.

### **Endnote**

This paper is based on a large-scale study which I am currently conducting to get a doctorate degree. I would like to thank Prof. Yamina El Kirat for her supervision and guidance. I would like also to thank Hssein Khtou for having read an earlier version of this paper. His comments were very useful.

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