

## Seen and Unseen: The Persistence of the Evil Eye in Greek Culture

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In her home's living room in Evros, yiayia Zoe sat beside me. The lace curtains fluttered gently in the summer breeze, and the room was fragrant with herbs laid out to dry. To investigate and potentially remove the evil eye, yiayia Zoe, one of the village healers in my mother's village, performed a ritual using three dried cloves and sewing needles. She began by tracing the sign of the cross on the table with each clove and then securing them onto the needles. According to yiayia Zoe, the cloves symbolize different sources: male, female, and those linked to divine forces or illness, and the sequence in which they are arranged is crucial—God created Adam first, and consequently, any suspicion regarding the source of the evil eye should begin with a male figure. She lit a match and held the flame to the first clove, waiting for a popping sound. There was no discernible sound as the dry bud blackened and curled inward. She then moved on to the second, followed by the third, but still nothing. “You’re fine,” she told me. “No evil eye.” Since yiayia Zoe had concluded that I had not been affected by the evil eye, she would not need to recite the incantation.

For generations, stories, beliefs, and practices related to the evil eye have been integral to my family's lore. The evil eye is a folk belief complex that transcends cultural and geographic boundaries and is present in numerous

societies worldwide. For many, it remains a widespread belief and an essential aspect of cultural identity. In Greek, the evil eye translates to *kako mati* (κακό μάτι); however, most often it is only referred to as *mati* (μάτι), and the accompanying affliction is known as *matiasma* (μάτιασμα). In the following paper, I examine and re-evaluate the persistence of the evil eye in contemporary and transnational spaces by critically engaging with anthropological and folkloric scholarship in combination with autoethnographic insights to emphasize its adaptability as an invisible yet potent force influencing behaviour, health, and social interactions.

While earlier theories of folklorists and anthropologists emphasize its function of social control, I want to demonstrate how the invisible aspects of the evil eye—its emotional, affective, and symbolic dimensions—allow it to adapt to contemporary urbanized, capitalistic and globalized contexts and highlight its purpose in rationalizing misfortune and tragedy. Understanding the evil eye as a narrative framework for making sense of the inexplicable is one of those elements that remained unseen as long as scholars analyzed the belief system only through the lens of social control. An exploration of both the visible and invisible dimensions of *mati* reveals how social norms and folk beliefs are dynamic and context-dependent, co-evolving with the complexities of modern life rather than remaining static and repressive. Hence, I argue that understanding why the belief in the evil eye is still widespread in contemporary Greek culture can offer valuable insights into how cultural and vernacular practices function as sources of resilience, agency,

empowerment, and security throughout socio-cultural and transnational contexts.

This paper begins by outlining my methodological approach and positionality to explain how my personal experiences, memories, and my family's narratives inform this paper. I then analyze everyday experiences and cultural practices associated with the evil eye in Greece as well as its modern iterations, tracing both its visible symptoms and invisible dimensions and examining symptomatology, prevention, and the role of ritual healing, emotions, and intergenerational transmission. From there, I engage the dominant theoretical perspective of social control in the context of the limited good paradigm, questioning its capacity to account for the persistence of *mati* in contemporary, urbanized, and globalized settings. In response, I highlight the adaptability of the folk belief in various contemporary socio-cultural contexts, examining its intersections with the Greek Orthodox Church, vernacular religiosity, and spiritual pluralism. Building on this, I propose an alternative explanation and nuanced framework to expand on the social control theory that acknowledges and foregrounds the importance of the evil eye's invisible, emotional, and affective dimensions, and conclude by reflecting on the implications of these findings that open new pathways for future ethnographic research.

### *Positionality and Methodology*

To clarify my positionality, I grew up in a Greek-Canadian family with an Austrian grandmother and an immigration background alternating between Greece, Germany, and Canada. Thus, the folk belief of the evil eye has played a

prominent and impactful role throughout my life and remains integral to my Greek heritage, familiarizing my family members and me with the various manifestations of it in different socio-cultural contexts, rural and urban, as well as in Greece and the Greek diaspora.

Methodologically, I am combining a thorough review of the literature about the evil eye folk belief complex in Greek culture with autoethnography to bridge the gap between traditional interpretations and contemporary perspectives and practices. The autoethnographic data presented here are based on my memory and conversations with family members and include various intriguing experiences, beliefs, customs, and case examples surrounding the evil eye. These narratives reach back generations and document the lived experiences of *matiasma*, revealing how these manifest in daily life while slowly but surely adapting to modernity and still affirming its existence as a folk belief. Having established the methodological approach, I will explain the everyday experiences and practices surrounding *mati* that sustain its relevance to the present.

### *The Ever-Present Threat: Experiencing and Preventing Mati*

In Greece, the evil eye plays a significant role in cultural practices and influences behaviour and social interactions daily (Dallas et al. 2020, 724). Various factors can trigger *matiasma*, the most considerable being envy, spite, excessive flattery, admiration, or praise (Georges 1962, 69). According to Chryssanthopoulou (2008), *mati* can be understood as a “psychic power” that emanates from an individual’s eyes (109). Roussou (2011) also argues that the

widespread public discourse is that the transmission of *mati* follows “through the exchange of electromagnetic energy” (95). Interestingly, the understanding that vision is a “form of energy” was first developed by ancient Greek philosophers to legitimize and support the belief and function of *mati* scientifically (Gifford 1958, 7). On a similar note, in the present, my parents both agree that “everything is energy” and believe that if someone has an intense gaze, it can negatively penetrate one's energetic field. This energy transmission occurs through “everyday sensory communication” (Roussou 2021, 53). Hence, the “energetic interplay of senses and emotions” afflicts a person with the evil eye (Roussou 2021, 53). Gossiping or even only thinking about a person is just as capable of inducing *matiasma* since the force of the “spiritual energy” can impact another person's body remotely (Roussou 2014, 426; Roussou 2021, 56), reflecting how the evil eye is not limited to a “physical gaze” but can also expand into an invisible “metaphorical gaze” (Souvlakis 2021, 216). Although *mati* is most often considered to be cast due to jealousy, it is an even more prevalent belief that individuals can affect others with *matiasma* unconsciously and unintentionally, even between family members who express pride and admiration (Chryssanthopoulou 2008, 109). Thus, anyone can be a carrier of *mati* (Chryssanthopoulou 2008, 109). *Matiasma* impacts people but can likewise affect their belongings, particularly “domestic animals, fruit trees, and field crops”(Gravel 1995, 5). I remember my grandfather would share a tale of his father's magnificent white horse, admired by everyone who saw it, until one day, without warning, the horse collapsed, and mysterious black spots marked its body. The death of the horse could

only be explained by concluding it was afflicted with the evil eye.

However, individuals most at risk of the evil eye are usually in transitional or liminal states, defined by Turner (1969) as betwixt and between social categories (95)— for example, newly married or pregnant women, unbaptized newborns, and young children (Gravel 1995, 5; Chryssanthopoulou 2008, 111). The following family stories illustrate this principle. My Austrian grandmother, who married my Greek grandfather, shared that she remembered experiencing *matiasma* for the first time. She was only five months pregnant with her third child. Although her pregnancy went well up to that moment, she said, “I received compliments for my growing belly from a woman who I later heard was known for casting the evil eye on others, so I prematurely delivered my daughter the same night. The doctors had no explanation why I went into labour far too soon.” Over forty years later, she still recalls how a joyful moment turned into a night of unexpected agony, and even though her reasoning defied medical explanations, it helped her rationalize this challenging experience. Another story in the collective memory of my family is the premature death of my grandfather’s youngest sister at only eleven months, which was a mystery but also explained through invisible forces at play, as it is said her beauty drew adoration from everyone who saw her. Because the person afflicted with *matiasma* risks losing enjoyment and good fortune in all of these areas in their life, the conclusion is that the evil eye typically often relates to themes of sexuality, productivity, luck, prosperity, and fertility (Gravel 1995, 35). Any unfortunate events, especially sudden or unexplainable ones, might be

attributed to exposure to “ocular fascination” (Gifford 1958, 9). Hence, the evil eye constantly moves between invisibility and visibility, as its transmission may be invisible, but the physical and mental symptoms are felt, and misfortunes are experienced.

According to my father, “There are several ways *mati* can affect someone.” The most commonly reported symptoms by my family members are headache, digestive issues, sleeplessness, and a bad mood. Similarly, the scholarly literature supports that typical symptoms include discomfort, headaches, irritability, difficulties sleeping, crankiness, inability to focus and stand, pervasive fatigue, weakness, and, in severe cases, even fainting (Dundes 1992, 110; Dallas et al. 2020, 724; Roussou 2021, 55). Continuous yawning and hiccups are also symptomatic (Gifford 1958, 9). My father said: “These symptoms are supposed to get worse over days. They do not get better with medication. Your body stops working properly until someone performs and completes the *xematiasma* ritual.” Hence, affected individuals are faced with “socio-somatic disconnection and isolation” (Roussou 2021, 55) and symptoms that are characterized as psychosomatic (Souvlakis 2021, 29). Biomedical approaches, like painkillers, are ineffective in alleviating these symptoms (Dallas et al. 2020, 725). As a result, believers do not link these symptoms to physical or biological factors, but rather to “emotional, energetic, and/or spiritual” origins (Roussou 2021, 54). Typically, these signs subside quickly following the performance of a healing ritual to cure the person’s affliction, elaborated upon below. However, in extreme cases where no cure is sought out, some believe it can even lead to “death within forty days” (Dundes 1992, 110).

Various ways to prevent and protect oneself from the evil eye impact peoples' everyday interactions and behaviour (Dallas et al. 2020, 724). For instance, my memories are filled with relatives and friends repeating “*ftou ftou ftou*” when complimenting me or others around me. It is supposed to imitate spitting to ward off *mati*. This gesture is so ingrained and visible in daily life that it often goes unnoticed or is taken for granted, which makes the evil eye a constant cultural presence. The practice of spitting three times on one's chest is an ancient tradition and the most common defence against the evil eye from the time of the ancient Greeks up to contemporary Greeks and Greek-Americans today, primarily to protect from any potential harm when someone cannot hold back their admiration (Georges 1962, 70). In general, prevention and protection are favoured over seeking a cure. Consequently, there is a strong emphasis on imitating spitting three times after complimenting anyone, as well as on wearing prophylactic and protective blue amulets and jewellery featuring an iris in the centre, also referred to as *matakia* (ματάκια), which are meant to ward off evil since the colour blue possesses “preventive power” (Georges 1962, 69-70; Dundes 1992, 110; Roussou 2021, 3). My late grandfather also suggested internally repeating, “*Koutsovelona sta matia sou*” (Κουτσοβέλονα στα μάτια σου) three times, which can be loosely translated to “nails to your eyes” and is supposed to return the malevolent energy to the transmitter of the *mati* so that their eyes are metaphorically “blinded.” This protective spell, which mentions nails, is also widespread among immigrant communities in Australia, as exemplified in Chryssanthopoulou's work (2008, 115). According to my

late grandfather, one could also wear underwear inside out or carry an amulet or *philachto* (*φουλαχτό*) for protection. Together, these practices illustrate how the power of *mati* is actively reinforced by all these protective and preventive symbolic and cultural practices, and whether material or immaterial, seen or unseen, they serve as a barrier against the constant invisible threat. Nevertheless, my father complained, "I still get the evil eye, no matter what I try to prevent it." Despite all of these preventive measures that aim to avert the influence of *mati*, its pervasive nature means that affliction is often unavoidable and requires intervention. In such cases, individuals turn to the healing ritual of *xematiasma*.

### *Xematiasma Ritual: Making the Invisible Tangible*

*Xematiasma* (ξεμάτιασμα) means to "take one's eyes out" and is a ritual healing cure that relieves a person from any symptoms related to *mati* in a short amount of time (Seremetakis 2009, 343). According to my family members, it takes only about five to fifteen minutes for the individual to feel better and for all symptoms of *matiasma* to dissipate. The most widespread of these rituals is relatively simple, as it only involves three drops of oil in a water bowl. If the oil vanishes and mingles with the water, which is not possible under normal circumstances as the two substances are immiscible, it is confirmed that the person is afflicted with *mati* (Dallas et al. 2020, 724; Seremetakis 2009, 343). Although the ritual of *xematiasma* performed by lay healers differs from region to region, the most popular one remains the cure with water and oil (Dallas et al. 2020, 724). Despite local differences, beliefs

surrounding the evil eye, including methods of diagnosing and treating it, remain remarkably consistent even for diasporic Greek communities (Chryssanthopoulou 2008, 107-108).

In a world marked by change, the persistence of *mati* offers a sense of comfort, stability, connection, and meaning through collective memory. A secret prayer, including the affected individual's name, is repeated during the ritual. However, it is inappropriate for the healer to ask for monetary compensation, and thanking the healer is unacceptable. Although almost everyone can claim familiarity with the practice, the most accomplished healers have developed expertise in their approaches and practices (Roussou 2014, 433).

Nevertheless, the cultural practices around *xematiasma* are not static. Over time, rituals evolve in response to urbanization, migration, and globalization, and the healing rituals associated with *mati* adapt accordingly, incorporating new technologies while remaining grounded in a shared cultural logic. For instance, my family members maintain a strong belief in the efficacy of ritual healing of *xematiasma*, whether performed in person or at a distance, which proves the ritual's capacity to transcend spatial boundaries. On a similar note, Seremetakis (2009) reveals that "telephonic exorcisms" are commonplace in every Greek city, even if not commercialized, and they reflect and "mediate the loss or fragmentation of social networks," in contrast to rural villages where villagers are more connected and in closer proximity (Seremetakis 2009, 340). Most memories I have of my grandfather healing family members from the evil eye were from a distance. Immediately after receiving such a phone call, he would

internally recite the secret prayer at least three times, but in worse cases of *matiasma*, even seven times.

I remember watching my grandfather perform the ritual countless times. He would yawn repeatedly, with tears streaming from his eyes, which is a clear sign that the afflicted person was indeed experiencing *matiasma*. Simultaneously, the person receiving the cure often began to yawn, as if the symptoms briefly transferred during the healing process. The general belief is that the healer also temporarily takes on the bodily symptoms. Hence, they have to perform the ritual for themselves immediately afterwards, too. Only if these symptoms were severe and noticeable enough would my grandfather do the most common healing ritual with water and oil. However, this approach is relatively intuitive, as it is most likely different for healers who may emphasize performing the ritual action to increase the effectiveness of the cure. Bubant et al. (2017), analyzing an Arab concept referred to as *al-ghayh*, which refers to hidden and invisible phenomena such as the evil eye, argue that rituals are “means of accessing the unseen” (1, 11). The successful ritualistic healing practiced by my grandfather, whether conducted from a distance or in proximity, demonstrates how ritual makes the invisible forces behind *mati* perceptible. While the symptoms may already be felt, the act of healing renders them culturally intelligible, affirming their cause and initiating a process of relief.

As the evidential support and narratives have shown, folk belief shapes human experience, including “the illusory appearance of experience,” and thus acts like a self-fulfilling prophecy (Hufford 1995, 20, 13). Belief remains key to culture. Individuals who already believe in

*mati*, whether through cultural transmission or acculturation, experience more intense symptoms if they are convinced they have been afflicted with it. Thus, personal belief and conviction shape an individual's susceptibility to *mati*, influencing how symptoms are experienced and interpreted. Analogously, individuals affected by the evil eye will feel relief when they know someone is performing the *xematiasma* for them. Recovery necessitates the protection and "ritual reintegration" of the affected individual into society (Veikou 2008, 95). Seremetakis (2009) shows how the evil eye is about individual affliction and physical bodies mediating unseen social tensions (338). Thus, the cure results from the ritual's words and actions and the social validation and approval given to the afflicted individual (Chryssanthopoulou 2008, 111).

Beyond the act of healing itself, the knowledge and power to perform these rituals are carefully safeguarded and passed down through generations. Secret prayers, referred to as *ta loyia* (τα λόγια), meaning "the words" in Greek, are passed intergenerationally, strictly in written form. The healing power can be lost if the secret prayer is transmitted orally. Thus, this sacred knowledge is concealed and revealed selectively to avoid commodification. Transferring this knowledge from a male to a female and vice versa, usually between close relatives, adds another layer of invisible cultural rules governing the belief. I am grateful that my late grandfather passed the sacred words accompanying *xematiasma* to me, even though I cannot share them in this paper. However, this limitation proves how the intergenerational transmission of the folk belief is an invisible legacy that ensures its

continuity through cultural practices that remain embedded in families, even if they are not visible to the public. Hence, invisibility also characterizes the transmission of the healing power. While these cultural practices prove the belief's persistence, understanding their broader implications requires engaging with dominant theoretical frameworks. The social control theory provides one such perspective, although its limitations in modern contexts need closer examination.

### *Social Control, Limited Good, and Greek Orthodoxy*

Traditionally, anthropological and folkloric studies were limited to rural communities and have interpreted the belief in *mati* as a form of social regulation (Roussou 2021, 13). Dionisopoulos-Mass (1976), investigating the evil eye in Greek villages, concludes that scholars have most often assumed it to be “a means of social control” and associated it with individuals, frequently labelled as witches, who possess the power to “bewitch people” (4, 2). The idea behind social control is that individuals are punished for their transgression of uniformity and established communal values and ways of being (Chryssanthopoulou 2008, 111). In the past, Mediterranean societies have been described as having a limited good worldview in which any desired goods “such as land, wealth, health, friendship and love, manliness and honour, respect and status, power and influence, security and safety...exist in finite quantity and are always in short supply” (Foster 1964, 296). Foster (1964) also argues that there is a notable lack of praise in village communities, since complimenting is seen as an act of aggression (67). However, seen as exclusively a form of

ocular aggression, the evil eye reduces the visual to status suppression, suggesting that it functions to constrain individual expressions of prosperity or beauty, especially when such traits provoke envy, thereby reinforcing social norms around humility and limiting perceived inequality within the community (Seremetakis 2009, 341). While its role in social control is plausible in small-scale, pastoral, and rural societies, it remains questionable whether the evil eye can be broadly used in modern urbanized and capitalist contexts (Roussou 2021, 13).

Although Gravel (1995) argues that the evil eye has an essential social control function, he also stresses the importance of examining folk belief within the specific social structures and “social sanctions” from which it emerged (3). One of the most significant contexts is the Greek Orthodox Church, Greece's dominant state religion, whose influence profoundly shapes public discourse as well as cultural and national identity (Roussou 2021, 31). The Greek Orthodox Church recognizes the evil eye as the devil's work, and thus, priests are officially the only ones allowed to heal *vaskania* (βάσκανια), which is the Church's terminology for it and means to “kill with the eye” (Roussou 2021, 172; Dallas et al. 2020, 723-725). Distinctions are drawn between *mati* and *vaskania*, as the former is caused unknowingly, and the latter is considered more dangerous and intentional (Dallas et al. 2020, 724). As the dominant religious authority in Greece, the Church's acceptance of the existence of the evil eye reaffirms the persistence of folk belief among Greek people (Roussou 2011, 101). It remains essential to note that the Greek Orthodox Church does not endorse the practice of ritual healing for the evil eye conducted by non-clergy lay

healers, nor does it officially approve of the use of amulets for personal protection (Roussou 2021, 172; Dallas et al. 2020, 725).

In contemporary times characterized by globalization and capitalism, the belief in *mati* endures not just because of its prominent role as a form of ocular aggression or social control, but precisely because of its subtle, often invisible presence in everyday life and its ability to adapt to changing sociocultural contexts (Seremetakis 2009, 341). The invisibility of *mati* complicates efforts to understand its role in regulating behaviour, particularly in urbanized and cosmopolitan contexts where social norms are neither uniformly enforced nor consistently interpreted. Oversimplifying these complexities risks missing the nuanced ways *mati* operates across different social settings. Explaining the folk belief exclusively through a social control framework seems to be a result of the “secularization thesis” that was popular among social scientists in the mid-19th century who envisioned that secularization is an inevitable process and will result in the world’s complete disenchantment and ultimately, the disappearance of folk beliefs and traditions (Hufford 1995, 17). Despite all odds, folk beliefs and traditions have survived and are still successfully thriving and adapting in the present (Hufford 1995, 26). Hence, the division between the scientific and the supernatural must also be challenged, as the evil eye operates within both invisible and visible physical realms, reflecting how the material world continuously interacts with the supernatural world (Roussou 2014, 436). Although the social control framework provides valuable insights, it overlooks the

profoundly affective and emotional dimensions of *mati*, which allow for rationalizing misfortune.

### *The Affective Dimensions of Mati*

If capitalism allows everybody to access goods, why do narratives about the evil eye persist even in highly capitalized societies? Since the social control theory is no longer broadly applicable, a possible answer to this question is that the affective dimension of loss persists despite globalization and consumer capitalism as a limited good. Thus, I want to complement social control by addressing the invisible and affective dimensions that allow individuals and even whole families to navigate uncertainty. From the personal data and anthropological documentation I have gathered and investigated, it becomes evident that the belief in the evil eye provides a narrative framework to rationalize and make sense of unexplainable, chaotic, and difficult life experiences, such as the loss of a child, as well as hardships associated to losing livestock, as illustrated in my family's case examples above. This rationalization can be beneficial and happens regardless of people's beliefs, upbringing, or shared cultural background. For instance, my grandmother, originally Austrian, was unfamiliar with the pervasive belief in comparison to her Greek husband. Hence, she stated she did not believe in it until it affected her for the first time during her third pregnancy. Although my grandmother was not a believer at first, her agonizing preterm birth experience led to her belief in the power of *mati* to this day. Here, belief in *mati* offers her a narrative framework to make sense of her challenging life experience while helping to process it.

The emotional and affective dimensions of the evil eye have been largely overlooked in anthropological and folkloric scholarship. Interestingly, the only academic source that supports a similar conclusion is anthropologist and psychoanalyst Kilborne's (2011) work on *The Evil Eye, Envy and Shame*. Kilborne (2011) states that popular sources on "magic, divination and healing" fail to position the role of beliefs in the evil eye within an explanatory framework that addresses "human suffering, uncertainty and illness" as an effective means of recognizing human emotions (132). According to Kilborne (2011), such narratives and explanations for the evil eye's existence mainly address the question: "Why am I experiencing sickness, unhappiness, or distress" (138)? Framing these questions in this way suggests that the nature of the inquiry validates these feelings, even though these questions generally belong to the realm of religion rather than that of science (Kilborne 2011, 138). Feelings of shame are directly tied to feelings of failure, as shame arises from failure and is rooted in self-judgment (Kilborne 2011, 139). Those complex emotions can be better processed if the blame for an inexplicable event is projected outside of oneself (Kilborne 2011, 139). Hence, people can externalize blame and make sense of chaotic or traumatic events by attributing misfortune to the evil eye, turning the folk belief into an invisible coping mechanism essential to individual and collective resilience that provides a meaningful way to navigate uncertainty and adversity. This understanding is also relevant when considering how evaluations of "efficacy in biomedicine" are ignorant towards essential components such as "personal narratives of patients and their subjective experiences," overlooking

phenomenological and affective experiences of ritual healing in the process (Dallas et al. 2020, 729). Hence, I argue that to understand the belief's persistence and its role in social empowerment elaborated upon below, it is crucial to recognize the role of these invisible emotional dimensions that offer support for rationalizing misfortune and navigating complex emotions like guilt, shame, and envy. Building on the affective dimensions of *mati*, I will now examine how the belief empowers individuals and communities socially in urban, transnational, vernacular, and digital contexts.

### *From Social Control to Social Empowerment*

At this point, it is essential to consider that social science has always revolved around invisible realms and the “poetics and politics of the unseen” (Bubant et al. 2011, 11-13). For qualitative scientists to comprehend the present state of the world sufficiently, direct engagement with the invisible realms of daily social life must be re-animated with the understanding that visibility and invisibility define each other (Bubant et al. 2011, 11, 13, 3). Performing *xematiasma* remains invisible and is contained in the private and domestic spheres among family members and close friends. Lay healers still employ Orthodox Christian symbolism and prayers, but their interpretations of Orthodox doctrine look different and are often amalgamated with various forms of spirituality as necessary (Roussou 2011, 101). Consequently, the line between “lay and doctrinal interpretations” blurs in vernacular practice (Roussou 2011, 101). Although the Greek Orthodox Church's recognition of the existence of *mati* legitimizes

the belief, their rejection of lay healing practices reflects their ongoing effort for spiritual authority. Lay healers continue to practice and thrive, showing the general public's conviction in the power of known and preferred cultural practices over institutional, dogmatic teachings that restrict individual agency and creativity.

Building on this dynamic pressure between tradition and authority, belief in the evil eye persists in modern urban settings and adapts to contemporary life while gradually diverging from traditional practices. This adaptability also suggests it serves functions beyond social regulation. Unlike faith, belief is more dynamic, fluid, and context-dependent, shifting across an individual's lifetime, and emerges within various socio-cultural, political, historical, and individual circumstances (Magliocco 2012, 7, 10, 14). In modern Greece, younger generations are increasingly moving to urban centers or even immigrating for better educational and occupational opportunities (Roussou 2021, 14). Despite this demographic shift, the folk belief of the evil eye is not forgotten or left behind (Roussou 2021, 14). Instead, the belief is adapted to new contexts and remains widespread among various spheres, including Greek Orthodox believers and non-believers (Roussou 2014, 427). Thus, Roussou (2021) suggests challenging the divide between the folk and the urban, along with the associated prevailing stereotypes, while recognizing that rural and urbanized spaces are more intertwined than separate (13-14).

The evil eye has become an entrenched part of vernacular religiosity (Roussou 2021, 3, 112). As the cultural contexts and spiritual plurality increase, the beliefs and practices change, and "pluralistic therapeutic paths"

emerge that need to become more visible (Roussou 2021, 3, 112). My Austrian grandmother, who never received the secret words and prayer as it was not part of her heritage, told me one could also recite three to seven times the Greek version of the ‘the Lord’s Prayer,’ also known as ‘Our Father’ (*Πάτερ ἡμῶν*), and that it works just as well. Interestingly, Seremetakis (2009) made a similar observation where an interlocutor’s mother claimed to recite the “Lord’s Prayer” seven times (344). Here, it becomes evident how laypeople often become independent agents in themselves, integrating elements of magic and religion, articulating prayers as incantations to develop creative techniques to counteract the influence of the evil eye (Gifford 1958, 53). Another interesting development reflecting contemporary spiritual plurality occurred after the passing of my grandfather, who was the most skilled healer in my family. My father now regularly listens to a Greek Orthodox priest on *YouTube* who recites a prayer to cure *vaskania* (Vima Orthodoxias 2021). Although my father appreciates Greek Orthodox priests and their wisdom as a devout believer, he does not visit a priest in person to be cured regularly because, as he jokingly said, “I would need to visit the priest every day!” The video of the priest reciting a blessing against *vaskania* to the camera has over one million views and, reportedly, is almost as effective for my father as any other cure (Vima Orthodoxias 2021). Such new, creative, and convenient approaches also tie back to my parents’ belief that, “Everything is energy,” a concept that is simultaneously accepted by the Greek Orthodox religion but also emphasized in the New Age movement and Eastern spirituality (Roussou 2021, 112). This idea is becoming increasingly popular and syncretized in Greece,

despite the Church's strong opposition in order to preserve their traditions (Roussou 2021, 112). With the rise of "telephonic exorcisms" and YouTube prayers, folk belief has transformed along with modern communication technologies (Seremetakis 2009, 340). Although such vernacular cultural practices are situated outside institutional frameworks, they are both accessible and visible online while simultaneously remaining private and invisible in one's home.

Finally, Roussou (2021), who has done fieldwork in both rural and urban environments in Greece, argues that approaching the folk belief of *mati* solely as a form of social control is limiting as it implies that people lack "social power and agency," leaving people subordinate to their community's absolute authority (12). In today's individualized, globalized and late-stage capitalist societies, most Greek people, whether they remained in their homeland or became part of the diaspora, live in urban environments characterized by anonymity and wealth (Roussou 2021, 60). Treating the persistent folk belief as mere superstition or "survival from the past" fails to recognize its active role in contemporary Greece, where it continues to shape cultural practices and social interactions, retaining an "active social position" (Roussou 2021, 60, 12). Instead of implying human beings are "passive and inactive," the belief can be understood as a form of social empowerment (Roussou 2021, 12). Roussou (2021) shows that it represents people who actively engage, instigate change, and transform from mere observers into "dynamic participants in their socio-cultural environment," gaining social empowerment precisely through practicing creatively without constraints (12). Hence, the inherent invisibility of

the folk belief introduces complexities regarding individual agency. While historically useful, the social control theory does not adequately address how individuals navigate or resist its influence. Concentrating on the agency of people shows how actions and beliefs still operate beneath mainstream societal norms and how *mati* still retains a powerful presence in the cultural and social imagination. This enduring presence of the evil eye among contemporary Greeks indicates that it can adapt and endure precisely because of its invisibility across different sociocultural landscapes and geographical locations.

### *Conclusion*

Understanding the visible and invisible elements of the evil eye can explain how this folk belief evolves and persists. As the autoethnographic and scholarly data show, the folk belief in *mati* syncretizes traditional and modern forms of official and vernacular religiosity, which allows it to continue in diverse manifestations. This adaptability also challenges the static social control framework, which, while relevant in a rural context, fails to account for the dynamic, context-dependent nature of folk beliefs in a globalized and spiritually pluralistic world. The persistence of the evil eye across time, space and digital landscapes suggests that elements which remain unseen, whether in scholarship or broader culture, are often just as influential as what is visible and material. In addition, recognizing the invisible affective aspects of *mati* enriches our understanding of its emotional and psychological dimensions. A closer examination of this folk belief shows how it empowers individuals and their families to navigate adversity, resist

social norms, and redefine cultural identity in an ever-changing world. It also contributes insights into how cultural practices relate to social determinants of health. Still, more ethnographic research needs to be conducted to observe how increasing spiritual pluralism affects engagement with the folk belief and how it allows for resisting behavioural and social norms in Greece and beyond. Future research could further explore the evil eye's affective dimensions, how spiritual plurality and digital technologies continue to shape the practice, and compare diasporic and transnational contexts to examine the intersections of belief, modernity, and agency. What is clear is that the folk belief in the evil eye provides narrative frameworks for making sense of unexplainable life events and helps manage complex emotions, such as guilt and shame. At the same time, creative engagement with associated cultural practices promotes personal and collective social empowerment and integration. As long as individuals and families continue transmitting and employing these cultural practices amid sociocultural transformations and transnational settings in the present and future, belief in the evil eye will remain a source of resilience and meaning-making as it enables people to reimagine their place in the world.

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## **R. Caroline Stampliaka**

R. Caroline Stampliaka a grandi dans une famille gréco-canadienne et a vécu en Allemagne et en Grèce avant de s'installer au Canada en 2019 pour poursuivre ses études postsecondaires. En mai 2024, elle a obtenu un baccalauréat avec mention en anthropologie socioculturelle à l'Université de Colombie-Britannique. Ses recherches et sa thèse portaient sur la documentation des pratiques de guérison vernaculaires dans les zones rurales de Grèce, et ses travaux universitaires ont mérité plusieurs prix au Canada et aux États-Unis. Présentement, elle poursuit des études de maîtrise en anthropologie environnementale à l'Université de Colombie-Britannique. Ses intérêts de recherche incluent les connaissances écologiques traditionnelles et les pratiques culturelles qui y sont associées, les histoires orales, le folklore, les systèmes alimentaires durables et la culture expressive de la Méditerranée, avec un accent particulier sur l'Europe du Sud et la Grèce.

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