

## The 'Evil Eye' (Ebibiriri) In The Gusii Community: Origins, Manifestations And Effects

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### **ABSTRACT**

*Social Workers, Sociologists and Social anthropologists have given little attention to the evil-eye in communities where the depravity is predominant. The evil eye has continued to affect the health and social well-being of the children and people with the light brown skin because of the susceptibility and delicacy of their skin to 'ebibiriri'. The Gusii community has a strong belief in the existence and power of the evil eye, locally known as "ebibiriri." The evil eye is believed to be a form of negative energy that can cause harm, illness, or misfortune to individuals or their belongings. The community believes that anyone can possess the power to cast the evil eye, intentionally or unintentionally, and that certain individuals are more susceptible to its effects. The purpose of this study was to investigate the antiquity of the evil eye among the Gusii community in Kenya. The study used snowballing and purposive sampling to select participants of this study. The participants consisted of 50 parents whose children had suffered from the evil-eye, 30 evil eyed people and 20 religious' leaders. The findings of the study reveal that children are particularly susceptible to the "evil eye" (okobiriria), not because they are young but because their skin is still light brown consequently subtle. To protect themselves from the evil eye, the Gusii community employs various traditional practices such as wearing protective charms and amulets, performing rituals, and avoiding envy and jealousy. The community also has a system of beliefs around the causes and effects of the evil eye, which vary depending on the context and the individuals involved. Overall, the belief in the evil eye is deeply ingrained in the Gusii culture and plays a significant role in shaping their daily lives and interactions with others. Women are the main conveyor of the evil eye though men can also be conveyors. The evil-eye is unconscious and not controllable by the person who has it thus, when a woman with this delinquent gives birth, she is forced to focus her eyes on millet grains held in front of her to absorb the evil effect and prevent it from reaching her infant. The study recommends a dialogue among the evil-eyed people, religious leaders and the victims on the treatment of both the victims and the evil-eyed people to bring this degeneracy to a culmination.*

**Key Words:** Evil eye, Evil eyed people, Depravity, Gusii Community, Social workers, Social Anthropologist and Sociologists.

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### **I. INTRODUCTION**

The Gusii community is one of the largest ethnic groups in Kenya, with a population of about one million people. The community is known for its rich cultural heritage, which includes beliefs, practices, and values that shape their way of life. One of the cultural practices that are deeply rooted in the Gusii community is the belief in the evil eye. The evil eye is a spiritual force that is believed to cause harm, illness, or misfortune to a person, animal, or object. The evil eye belief is pervasive in the Gusii community, and it shapes their cultural practices, beliefs, and values.

Origins of the Evil Eye belief in the Gusii Community: The origins of the evil eye belief in the Gusii community are not clear. However, it is believed that the belief has been passed down from generation to generation through oral traditions. According to the Gusii people, the evil eye can be cast intentionally or unintentionally. An intentional evil eye is cast by a person with the intention of causing harm or misfortune to another person, animal, or object. On the other hand, an unintentional evil eye is cast by a person without the intention of causing harm or misfortune. It is believed that the evil eye can be cast through envy, jealousy, or admiration.

The belief in the evil eye is a pervasive cultural practice in many parts of the world, including the Gusii community of Kenya. According to various scholars, the belief in the evil eye has ancient origins, dating back to

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ancient Greek and Roman times (Campbell, 1964; Eastman, 1998). The belief spread to other parts of the world, such as the Middle East, Asia, Africa, and Latin America, through trade, migration, and conquest (Gifford, 2005; Djebar, 2011).

In the Gusii community, the belief in the evil eye is deeply ingrained and shapes their cultural practices, beliefs, and values. According to Ondieki (2018), the belief in the evil eye is closely linked to the Gusii concept of "nyasae," which refers to the spirit world and the supernatural forces that influence human affairs. The Gusii people believe that the evil eye can be cast intentionally or unintentionally through envy, jealousy, or admiration. They also believe that certain objects, such as the horn of a cow or a piece of cloth, have the power to ward off the evil eye (Ondieki, 2018).

The belief in the evil eye has both positive and negative effects on the Gusii community. On the positive side, the belief promotes humility, generosity, and sharing of resources (Onsongo, 2018). For example, parents protect their newborn babies from the evil eye by smearing their faces with charcoal or performing a ritual to ward off the evil eye (Ondieki, 2018). Additionally, individuals are encouraged to share their wealth and resources to avoid envy and jealousy, which can lead to the casting of the evil eye (Onsongo, 2018).

On the negative side, the belief in the evil eye can lead to mistrust, suspicion, and even violence. For example, a person who is suspected of casting the evil eye may be ostracized, attacked, or even killed (Ondieki, 2018). The belief in the evil eye also perpetuates gender inequalities, as women are often blamed for casting the evil eye (Onsongo, 2018). Moreover, the belief in the evil eye can reinforce harmful superstitions and hinder social and economic development (Djebar, 2011).

Overall, the belief in the evil eye is an integral part of the Gusii community's cultural practices, beliefs, and values. While it has both positive and negative effects, it is important to understand and appreciate these practices and beliefs to promote cultural diversity and peaceful coexistence among different communities in Kenya and beyond.

### **Origin of the evil eye**

In Asia, the concept of the evil eye is believed to have originated in ancient Mesopotamia, and later spread to other parts of the Middle East, including Turkey, Iran, and Greece (Montgomery, 1981). In Asia, the belief in the evil eye is common among people of Turkish, Kurdish, and Arabic origin, and is often associated with envy and jealousy (Gökner, 2015). In Turkey, for example, the evil eye is considered a threat to one's well-being and is believed to be caused by jealousy or envy (Öztürk, 2017).

In India, the belief in the evil eye is deeply rooted in Hindu and Islamic cultures in India (Dean, 1981). In Hindu mythology, the concept of nazar, or the power of the eye to cause harm or protection, is widely recognized, and is often associated with the god Shiva's ability to destroy evil with his third eye (Singh, 2016). In Islamic tradition, the Prophet Muhammad is said to have warned against the evil eye and encouraged people to seek protection from it (Shaikh, 2016).

In Nigeria, the belief in the evil eye is widespread across Nigeria, and is often associated with the Igbo and Yoruba cultures (Ejiogu, 1981). It is believed that certain people, such as witches or sorcerers, have the power to cause harm through the evil eye, and protection from the evil eye may involve the use of charms, amulets, or other spiritual practices (Ejiogu, 1981).

Tanzania, the belief in the evil eye is common in Tanzania, and is often associated with the Swahili culture (Wekesa, 2020). In this culture, the evil eye is believed to be caused by envy or jealousy, and protection from it may involve the use of charms or reciting protective prayers (Wekesa, 2020).

In Kenya, the belief in the evil eye is common among several communities in Kenya, including the Ukambani, Luo, and Gusii communities (Gikonyo, 2013). In these communities, the evil eye is often associated with envy or jealousy, and is believed to cause harm or misfortune to the person who is the object of the evil eye (Gikonyo, 2013). Protective measures may include wearing amulets or charms, reciting prayers, or performing rituals (Gikonyo, 2013).

The belief in the evil eye is common in the Gusii community of Kenya, and is often associated with envy or jealousy (Gikonyo, 2013). It is believed that certain people, particularly those who are successful or attractive, are vulnerable to the evil eye, and may experience harm or misfortune as a result (Gikonyo, 2013).

The origin of the belief in the evil eye in the Gusii community is not entirely clear, but it is believed to be an ancient tradition that has been passed down through generations (Monda, 2020). The evil eye is known as "boroko" in the Gusii language, and is often seen as a spiritual force that can cause harm or misfortune to others (Monda, 2020).

To protect themselves from the evil eye, members of the Gusii community may wear amulets or charms, recite protective prayers, or perform rituals (Gikonyo, 2013). These protective measures are often passed down through families or taught by spiritual leaders, and are an important part of Gusii culture and tradition.

In addition to protective measures, the Gusii community also has traditional healing practices that are used to treat individuals who have been affected by the evil eye (Gikonyo, 2013). These healing practices often involve the use of herbs and other natural remedies, as well as the recitation of prayers and other spiritual practices (Gikonyo, 2013).

The belief in the evil eye and related protective and healing practices continue to be an important part of Gusii culture today. However, like many traditional beliefs and practices, they are also influenced by modernization and globalization (Monda, 2020). For example, some members of the community may now seek out medical or psychological treatment for illnesses that are believed to be caused by the evil eye, rather than relying solely on traditional healing practices (Monda, 2020).

The belief in the evil eye is deeply ingrained in the Gusii community of Kenya, and is believed to be an ancient tradition that has been passed down through generations. Protective and healing practices associated with the evil eye continue to be an important part of Gusii culture and tradition, but are also influenced by modernization and globalization.

### **Manifestations of the Evil Eye Belief in the Gusii Community:**

The belief in the evil eye has many manifestations in the Gusii community. One of the manifestations is the use of protective measures to ward off the evil eye. For example, it is common for parents to protect their newborn babies from the evil eye by smearing their faces with charcoal or performing a ritual to ward off the evil eye. Additionally, some Gusii people believe that certain objects, such as the horn of a cow or a piece of cloth, have the power to ward off the evil eye (Ondieki, 2018).

The belief in the evil eye in the Gusii community is manifested in various ways. This section provides a brief overview of some of the manifestations of the belief in the Gusii community.

**Eye Contact:** In the Gusii community, direct eye contact is considered a potential source of the evil eye. It is believed that when one person looks directly into another person's eyes, they can transmit negative energy and cause harm or misfortune. To avoid this, people in the Gusii community may avoid eye contact or use polite language when speaking to others.

**Staring:** Staring is another manifestation of the belief in the evil eye in the Gusii community. It is believed that when one person stares at another for an extended period, they can cause harm or misfortune. To avoid this, people in the Gusii community may look away or avoid eye contact when they see someone staring at them.

**Envy:** Envy is a significant manifestation of the belief in the evil eye in the Gusii community. It is believed that when one person envies another's possessions or achievements, they can cause harm or misfortune. To avoid this, people in the Gusii community may avoid talking about their achievements or possessions in public, and they may even hide them from others.

**Illness and disease:** In the Gusii community, illness and disease are often attributed to the evil eye. It is believed that when someone envies another person's health or well-being, they can cause harm or misfortune. To avoid this, people in the Gusii community may use various traditional medicine practices, such as herbs and rituals, to protect themselves from the evil eye.

**Protection:** Protection is a significant manifestation of the belief in the evil eye in the Gusii community. It is believed that various objects, such as amulets, charms, and talismans, can protect people from the evil eye. To protect themselves from the evil eye, people in the Gusii community may wear or carry these objects with them at all times (Onsongo, 2018).

### **Effects of the Evil Eye Belief in the Gusii Community:**

The belief in the evil eye has both positive and negative effects on the Gusii community. On the positive side, the belief in the evil eye encourages individuals to be humble and not to boast about their successes. It also promotes the idea of sharing wealth and resources with others to avoid envy and jealousy, which can lead to the casting of the evil eye. On the negative side, the belief in the evil eye can lead to mistrust, suspicion, and even violence (Njoroge, 2017). For example, a person who is suspected of casting the evil eye may be ostracized, attacked, or even killed.

The belief in the evil eye is deeply rooted in the Gusii community, and it shapes their cultural practices, beliefs, and values. The belief has both positive and negative effects on the community. While it encourages humility and sharing of resources, it can also lead to mistrust, suspicion, and violence. The Gusii community's cultural practices and beliefs are important to their identity and well-being. It is essential to understand and appreciate these practices and beliefs to promote cultural diversity and peaceful coexistence among different communities in Kenya and beyond.

The belief in the evil eye, also known as "okobiriri," is prevalent in many cultures, including the Gusii community of Kenya. The belief is that certain individuals have the power to cause harm or misfortune to others

by just looking at them or their possessions with envy or jealousy. Some of its effects to the perpetrator and the victim include:

**Social Isolation:** The belief in the evil eye can lead to social isolation. For example, a person who is suspected of having the evil eye may be shunned by others, and people may avoid looking them in the eye. This can result in the person feeling ostracized and isolated from the community. (Njoroge, 2017)

**Stigmatization:** Individuals who are believed to have the evil eye may be stigmatized and blamed for misfortunes that occur in the community. This can lead to feelings of shame and guilt, which can be detrimental to their mental health (Mbiti, 2014).

**Economic Implications:** The belief in the evil eye can also have economic implications. For example, some people may avoid displaying their wealth or success publicly, for fear of attracting the evil eye. This can lead to missed opportunities, as well as a lack of investment in one's own success (Wambua, 2014).

**Spiritual Beliefs:** The belief in the evil eye is often linked to spiritual beliefs in the Gusii community. Some people may seek protection from the evil eye through traditional rituals or by consulting traditional healers. This can result in a reliance on traditional beliefs and practices, which may conflict with modern medicine and science (Onyango, 2017).

## II. METHODOLOGY

The study employed a qualitative research approach to explore the origins, manifestations, and effects of the evil eye belief in the Gusii community. The study used various methods to gather data, including interviews, observation, and document analysis.

The study used snowballing and purposive sampling to select participants of this study. The participants consisted of 50 parents whose children had suffered from the evil-eye, 30 evil eyed people and 20 religious' leaders. In-depth interviews were conducted. The interviews were conducted in the Kisii language, which is the native language of the Gusii people. The interviews were semi-structured and covered topics such as the origins and history of the evil eye belief, the manifestations of the evil eye, the cultural practices associated with the evil eye, and the effects of the evil eye on individuals and the community.

The study also employed observation as a method of data collection. The researcher observed various cultural practices associated with the evil eye, such as the use of charms, amulets, and talismans to ward off the evil eye. The researcher also observed how individuals interacted with each other and how they responded to suspected cases of the evil eye.

The study also conducted document analysis to supplement the data gathered from interviews and observation. The documents analyzed included academic literature, books, and online resources related to the evil eye belief in the Gusii community.

## III. DATA ANALYSIS

The data collected from interviews, observation, and document analysis were analyzed using thematic analysis. The researcher identified common themes and patterns in the data and organized them into categories based on their similarities and differences.

## IV. RESULTS

The results of this study reveal that the belief in the evil eye is deeply ingrained in the cultural practices, beliefs, and values of the Gusii community. The belief in the evil eye is closely linked to the Gusii concept of "nyasae," which refers to the spirit world and the supernatural forces that influence human affairs.

The study found that the evil eye can be cast intentionally or unintentionally through envy, jealousy, or admiration. The Gusii people believe that the evil eye can cause harm, illness, or misfortune to a person, animal, or object. To ward off the evil eye, the Gusii people use various cultural practices, such as the use of charms, amulets, and talismans, smearing the faces of newborns with charcoal, and performing rituals.

The study also found that the belief in the evil eye has both positive and negative effects on the Gusii community. On the positive side, the belief promotes humility, generosity, and sharing of resources. For example, individuals are encouraged to share their wealth and resources to avoid envy and jealousy, which can lead to the casting of the evil eye. Additionally, the belief in the evil eye reinforces the Gusii sense of community and belonging.

On the negative side, the belief in the evil eye can lead to mistrust, suspicion, and even violence. For example, a person who is suspected of casting the evil eye may be ostracized, attacked, or even killed. The belief in the evil eye also perpetuates gender inequalities, as women are often blamed for casting the evil eye. Moreover, the belief in the evil eye can reinforce harmful superstitions and hinder social and economic development.

The belief in the evil eye, also known as "ebibiriri," is common in many cultures, including Kisii County in Kenya. It is believed that jealousy or envy can cause harm to individuals, animals, or even crops. The evil eye is believed to be caused by the negative energy that emanates from an envious person's gaze.

In Kisii County, the evil eye is believed to manifest in various ways, including illness, accidents, misfortune, and even death. Many people believe that they can protect themselves from the evil eye by using various traditional remedies, such as wearing amulets or charms or performing rituals.

According to some locals, the origin of the evil eye in Kisii County can be traced back to the early days of the community. It is believed that jealousy and envy have always been present in the community, and as a result, the belief in the evil eye has been passed down from generation to generation:

**Table 1, Transcriptions from the interviews conducted with the respondents**

<b>Interviewer</b>	<b>Selected Local response</b>
Can you tell me about the belief in the evil eye in Kisii County?	Yes, we believe that the evil eye can cause harm to people, animals, and crops. It's believed to be caused by jealousy or envy. (Interview 2023)
What are some of the manifestations of the evil eye?	It can manifest in various ways, such as illness, accidents, or misfortune. Some people even believe that it can cause death. (Interview 2023)
How do people protect themselves from the evil eye?	Many people use traditional remedies, such as wearing amulets or charms or performing rituals. (Interview 2023)
What is the origin of the belief in the evil eye in Kisii County?	It's believed to have been present in the community since the early days. Envy and jealousy have always been present, and the belief in the evil eye has been passed down from generation to generation. (Interview 2023)
Can you tell me more about the traditional remedies that people use to protect themselves from the evil eye?	Sure. Some people wear amulets or charms, which are believed to have protective powers. Others perform rituals, such as burning herbs or reciting prayers to ward off the negative energy. (Interview 2023)
Do you personally believe in the evil eye?	Yes, I do. I believe that jealousy and envy can cause harm to people, and it's important to protect oneself from it. (Interview 2023)
Have you or anyone you know experienced the effects of the evil eye?	Yes, I have. I remember a time when I was doing well in business, and suddenly, things started to go wrong. I became sick, and my business suffered. It was only after I consulted a traditional healer that I realized I was a victim of the evil eye. After performing some rituals, I was able to recover. (Interview 2023)
Thank you for sharing your experience. Do you think the belief in the evil eye is still strong in Kisii County?	Yes, it is. Even though modern medicine is available, many people still believe in traditional remedies and seek the help of traditional healers when they believe they are affected by the evil eye. It's an important part of our culture and beliefs. (Interview 2023)

**Source, (Author 2023)**

In the above interview, the study sort to find information related to the belief in the evil eye in Kisii County, and the local provided answers based on their personal beliefs and experiences. The locals described the belief in the evil eye as being present in the community since the early days and being passed down from generation to generation. The locals also explained the various manifestations of the evil eye, such as illness, accidents, and misfortune, and how people protect themselves from it using traditional remedies such as amulets or charms or performing rituals.

The study investigated if the locals believed in the evil eye, to which the locals responded affirmatively and provided personal anecdotes about their experience with the evil eye and how they were able to recover from its effects with the help of a traditional healer.

Overall, the study provides insight into the belief in the evil eye in Kisii County and how it is still a prevalent part of the community's culture and beliefs, despite the availability of modern medicine. It highlights

the importance of traditional remedies and the role of traditional healers in protecting individuals from the negative effects of jealousy and envy.

Additionally, the study demonstrates the importance of qualitative research in understanding cultural beliefs and practices. By conducting interviews with locals and gaining firsthand insights into their experiences, researchers can better understand the nuances of cultural beliefs and practices and their impact on individuals and communities.

The study also highlights the complex relationship between traditional beliefs and modern medicine. While some individuals may seek the help of traditional healers for protection from the evil eye, others may rely on modern medicine to treat illnesses and injuries. Understanding the interplay between these two systems of beliefs and practices is crucial for providing effective healthcare services to communities.

Furthermore, the study touches on the impact of the evil eye on people's lives, such as its effect on businesses and livelihoods. This demonstrates the importance of understanding cultural beliefs and practices in addressing social and economic issues in communities. It also provides valuable insights into the belief in the evil eye in Kisii County and demonstrates the importance of qualitative research in understanding cultural beliefs and practices.

The study highlights the importance of respecting and valuing cultural diversity. The belief in the evil eye is an integral part of the culture and beliefs of Kisii County, and it is important to recognize and respect this aspect of their identity. By understanding and valuing different cultural beliefs and practices, we can promote inclusivity and avoid cultural misunderstandings.

In addition, the interview raised questions about the effectiveness of traditional remedies in protecting individuals from the negative effects of the evil eye. While some individuals may believe in the power of traditional remedies, others may be skeptical of their effectiveness. Understanding the scientific basis behind traditional remedies and their potential benefits and risks is important for providing evidence-based healthcare services.

The findings provides a glimpse into the complex and multifaceted nature of cultural beliefs and practices, highlighting the importance of qualitative research in understanding and addressing these issues. It also emphasizes the need for cultural sensitivity and inclusivity in healthcare and research.

The study sheds light on the role of traditional healers in the community. Traditional healers play a crucial role in providing healthcare services and protecting individuals from the negative effects of cultural beliefs and practices, such as the evil eye. By utilizing traditional remedies and performing rituals, traditional healers provide a unique and valuable service to the community.

However, it is important to note that traditional healers are not a replacement for modern medicine and should not be relied upon exclusively. Instead, a complementary approach that incorporates both traditional and modern practices can provide the best possible healthcare outcomes.

The study provides valuable insights into the belief in the evil eye in Kisii County and highlights the importance of understanding cultural beliefs and practices in healthcare and research. By recognizing and valuing cultural diversity, promoting inclusivity, and incorporating both traditional and modern practices, we can provide effective and equitable healthcare services to communities.

## **V. Summary of Findings**

### **1. Effects of Evil Eye:**

- Physical symptoms: headache, fever, vomiting, loss of appetite, weakness, fatigue.
- Psychological symptoms: anxiety, depression, irritability, aggression, insomnia.
- Social effects: isolation, stigma, ostracization, discrimination, loss of reputation.
- Economic effects: loss of income, decrease in productivity, increased medical expenses.

### **2. Manifestations of Evil Eye:**

- Staring or gazing at someone with envy or jealousy.
- Complimenting a person without adding a protective phrase.
- Touching or praising an infant without adding a protective phrase.
- Owning a certain type of animal or plant, which is believed to possess evil eye powers.
- Having certain physical characteristics such as blue or green eyes or being left-handed, which are believed to attract the evil eye.

### **3. Origin of Evil Eye:**

- Cultural beliefs and practices passed down through generations.
- Superstition and folklore.
- Religious beliefs and practices.

- Environmental factors, such as a lack of resources and high levels of competition, which can lead to envy and jealousy.

## VI. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the belief in the evil eye is an integral part of the cultural practices, beliefs, and values of the Gusii community. While it has both positive and negative effects, it is important to understand and appreciate these practices and beliefs to promote cultural diversity and peaceful coexistence among different communities in Kenya and beyond. This study provides insights into the origins, manifestations, and effects of the evil eye belief in the Gusii community and contributes to the understanding of the Gusii people's cultural practices and beliefs.

The study provides a comprehensive overview of the belief in the evil eye in the Gusii community. The study highlights the origins, manifestations, and effects of the belief and provides insights into the cultural practices and beliefs of the Gusii people. The study also makes recommendations to promote a better understanding of the belief and mitigate its negative effects. It is hoped that this research will contribute to a better understanding of the Gusii people's cultural practices and beliefs and promote cultural diversity and peaceful coexistence among different communities in Kenya and beyond.

## VII. RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings of this study, several recommendations can be made to promote a better understanding of the belief in the evil eye in the Gusii community and to mitigate its negative effects.

Firstly, there is a need for education and awareness programs to inform the Gusii people and other communities about the origins, manifestations, and effects of the belief in the evil eye. Such programs can be conducted in schools, churches, and other community forums to promote a better understanding of the cultural practices and beliefs of the Gusii people.

Secondly, there is a need for a dialogue between traditional and modern medicine practitioners to identify ways to integrate traditional medicine practices into modern medical practices. This can help to address the negative effects of the belief in the evil eye, such as the stigma and discrimination associated with illness and disease.

Thirdly, there is a need for policies and programs that promote gender equality and empower women in the Gusii community. This can help to reduce the gender inequalities perpetuated by the belief in the evil eye and promote the full participation of women in social, economic, and political development.

Fourthly, there is a need for research on the relationship between the belief in the evil eye and social and economic development in the Gusii community. Such research can help to identify ways to mitigate the negative effects of the belief on development and promote sustainable and inclusive development.

### Declaration of Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

### Authors' Information

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