

30. SUPERSTITION, EVIL EYE AND “JETTATURA”

Naples is a city full of mystery, legend and wonder but also one full of magic, superstition and numbers. As **Matilde Serao** says: *Tutte le superstizioni sparse nel mondo sono raccolte in Napoli e ingrandite, moltiplicate poiché la sua credulità è frutto dell'ignoranza, della miseria e delle sventure che a Napoli si sono alternate dai diversi attacchi del colera all'eruzione del Vesuvio nel 1872* (the various superstitions from all over the world come together in Naples where they are then magnified and multiplied because belief in them is the result of the ignorance, misery and tragedy that have beset Naples over the centuries from the cholera outbreaks to the 1872 Vesuvius eruption).

But what exactly is a **superstition**? For the Latin writer **Cicero** superstitious people were those who turned to the gods with their prayers and offerings and sacrifices in the hope that they might be saved. In more general terms, a superstition indicates an irrational kind of belief that future events can be influenced by certain kinds of action or objects even though there is no causal relationship between the event and these objects or actions. When the superstition is based on the idea that somebody has evil powers, we talk about “**the evil eye**”. This is the ability to cause harm to people or things, either intentionally or not, through a sort of “negative energy” which is cast or directed through a person’s stare (the Neapolitan term “**jettatura**” comes from the verb meaning “to throw”). The origin of the evil eye superstition dates back to ancient times. There are references to it in the Old Testament and the idea of the evil eye or *fascinum* was very widespread in Roman culture too.

The Neapolitan idea of the evil eye is a particular ideology which originated amongst the upper classes at the end of XVIII century and has been lent a local colour which makes it different from the rest. There are lots of anecdotes from the end of XVIII century and throughout the XIX century about people who had the evil eye, including **Andrea De Iorio**, an indisputably famous archaeologist. It is said that **Ferdinando IV** was looking forward to receiving such a distinguished man at court but, as soon as he heard about the man’s reputation for having the evil eye he started to get worried and, in fact, the day after the visit he died. It is most likely that the king died of natural causes given his advanced age but, from that day onwards, the reputation of De Iorio as a “jettatura”, or someone who could cast the evil eye, was confirmed.

But how could people protect themselves from the evil eye?

«*Agljo, fravaglie, fatture can un quaglie: corna, bicorna, cape 'e alice e cape d'aglio*», *Garlic, intestines, spells that don't work; horns, whitebait heads and heads of garlic*», said **Peppino De Filippo** over and over again to himself in the role of **Pappagone**.

Apart from “formulae” to ward off the evil eye there were also a lot of **talismans** which were used. In olden times people used to hang a **tangled mass of wool** outside the door so that witches or spirits had to unravel it before they could get in. The idea of a **broom** placed across the door was similar: it would take the evil spirits longer to get into the house because they had to count the bristles first.

There are a lot of different charms and talismans used against the evil eye these days: **horseshoes, hunchbacks** (*o scartellato* in the Neapolitan Smorfia) whose hump brings especially good luck if you touch it, the **number 13, garlic wreaths, chilli peppers** and above all a **horn** or **horns**, meaning both the object and the gesture made with the hand and two outstretched fingers to indicate two horns.

The horn

This is the most commonly found charm in any Neapolitan house. Its origins date back to the **Neolithic period**, when cave-dwellers used to hang them over the entrance to their cave as a **fertility symbol**. Horns were later offered to the **goddess Isis** to ask her to help animals reproduce.

Horns are said to have the power to ward off the evil eye and bad luck as long as they are a particular kind of horn. They have to be **red** (in the Middle Ages red symbolised victory over one's enemy), **hand-made** so they acquire the healing powers of the hand that fashioned it, given as **a present**, and be **hard, empty, twisted** and **pointed**.

Horns

Particular attention should be focused on the way horns were used, both as an object and a gesture. Right from Greek and Roman times onwards, horns were used to **protect people from evil spirits** and to bestow **fecundity and well-being** because of their pointed shape which made them like a weapon. Other people say that their shape represents **male sexuality** so is capable of impregnating but also of warding off evil.

People make the horns gesture as a response when someone wishes bad luck on them and they want to shield themselves and return the bad luck to the sender. The gesture was even used in 1975 by the then President of the Republic, **Giovanni Leone**, in response to the student protesters in Pisa, who hoped that he would suffer the same fate as his fellow Neapolitan citizens (there was a serious outbreak of cholera in the city at the time). Leone, being the good Neapolitan that he was, reacted by making the horns gesture with both hands.

The game of Lotto

The fact that superstitions are so original in Naples is to do with the game **Lotto** and reading the **Smorfia**. Originally called "the seminary game", it dates back to 1576, when the Genoan patrician **Benedetto Gentile** decided to give each of the 120 candidates who had been nominated to become members of the College of the Republic a number and these 120 numbers were then put into an urn called a "seminary". **The first 5 numbers** drawn would form the College. People started to bet on which numbers would be drawn and those who guessed correctly would win a prize after paying the agreed quota.

It was in **Genoa** that the game of Lotto originated. Based on the principles of the seminary game, it had only **90 numbers** which corresponded to the names of the candidates for the Senate.

In 1682 the game reached Naples too and became what **Giustino Fortunato** described as *la rovina economica e la corruzione morale della plebe* or the financial and moral ruin of the people. We will look to **Matilde Serao** to explain what the situation regarding the Lotto game was like in Naples at the time. In her book, *Ventre di Napoli* she writes: *Il lotto è il largo sogno che consola la fantasia napoletana: è l'idea fissa di quei cervelli infuocati; è la grande visione felice che appaga la gente oppressa; è la vasta allucinazione che si prende le anime. Il popolo napoletano, che è sobrio, non si corrompe per l'acquavite, non muore di delirium tremens; esso si corrompe e muore pel lotto. Il lotto è l'acquavite di Napoli.* (Lotto was the great dream which comforted the Neapolitan imagination: it was an obsession for those inflamed hearts; it was the great happy vision which comforted an oppressed people; a great hallucination which completely took hold of them. The Neapolitan race is a sober race, that won't be corrupted by alcohol and doesn't die of the shakes; but they would be corrupted and be prepared to die for the Lotto).

Over time, the game became popular with the middle classes and aristocracy as well. Every Saturday afternoon people waited for the **numbers to be drawn**. The most fanatical would go there in person, others would send someone to the nearest Lotto booth to get the numbers and then tell everyone. People would do anything to be able to play, they would even pawn possessions or steal to get the money, and often ended up in the hands of loan sharks.

To make sure they got the "right" numbers, Neapolitans would consult the **Smorfia** book, whose name derives from **Morfeo** or Morpheus, the Greek god of dreams and sleep. The Smorfia, therefore, is simply an interpretation of dreams and everyday occurrences in terms of numbers that can be used to play the Lotto. The information was first passed on orally

then later it was written down as well. Because lots of the lower classes were illiterate at the time, there are several editions which use pictures as well as words to explain the numbers. The Smorfia is so deep-rooted in Neapolitan culture that it has often been the subject of films and television sketches. The comic trio made up of **Massimo Troisi**, **Lello Arena** and **Enzo Decaro** were actually called this, and in one their most famous sketches, they asked San Gennaro, the Patron Saint of Naples, to give them a winning “combination” of numbers.