

# Arboreal Attachment/Detachment The Felling of a Lonesome Tree in Muhammad Zafzāf's “The Sacred Tree”

Marianne Marroum

Lebanese American University, Lebanon

**Abstract** This study interprets Muhammad al-Zafzāf's “The Sacred Tree” in light of a myriad of social, political and religious constructions that surround a sacred tree and its cutting, a decision taken by the government and implemented by workers hired by the authorities. This short story is from the eponymous collection written in 1980 by the late Moroccan writer, one of the most famous Arabic-language novelists, short story writers and poets in Morocco in the 20th century. I hope to shed some light on the interplay between the local and the universal in relation to the sacred and the profane, manifested as the dialectic and yet often incongruent relation between the natural and the sacred as well as the modern and the traditional. The analysis highlights the critical stance the author takes towards the outdated and superstitious beliefs that still take hold of his society, perhaps hoping to bring about some change.

**Keywords** The sacred tree. The sacred. The profane. The political. The social. The superstitious. Upheaval. Change.

**Summary** 1 Introduction. – 2 The Sacred. – 3 A Political Oppressive Force. – 4 The Sacred, the Superstitious and the Profane. – 5 The Felling of the Tree: the Populace and the Authorities. – 6 Conclusion.



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## 1 Introduction

“The Sacred Tree”, a title quite significant, perhaps ironic, as the first sentence of this short story highlights the indifference of some educated youth to the cutting of a sacred tree. They even smile with derision and contempt. One cannot but speculate about the reasons for cutting such a tree as well as the reasons behind the youngsters’ mockery.

The aim of this paper is to analyse the “arbori-culture” in Muhammad Zafzāf’s text and its impact on the lives of various characters. The short story at hand is from the eponymous collection written in 1980 by the late Moroccan writer, one of the most famous Arabic-language novelists, short story writers and poets in Morocco in the 20th century. Owain Jones and Paul Cloke in *Tree Cultures: The place of Trees and Trees in Their Place* refer to the term “‘arbori-culture’ especially relating to myriad social constructions which positioned trees as anything from sources of timber to living spirits” (2002, 3). Clearly, the myriad of social constructions in “The Sacred Tree” are specific to the Moroccan culture, despite some universal elements. Ronak Husni and Daniel L. Newman, the translators of the story into English, attest to this fact. In their view, the story here provides a good example of the type of prose and subject matter tackled by Zafzāf:

The language is Standard Arabic, yet clearly Moroccan (or North African) in the way it is used, with a number of peculiarly Moroccan usages. This fits in well with the subject, which, despite certain universal features, is quintessentially Moroccan and reveals a great many things about that country’s contemporary society. (Husni, Daniel 2008, 57)

More specifically, the aim of this paper is to reveal the interplay between the local and the universal in relation to the sacred and the profane, manifested as the dialectic and yet often incongruent relation between the natural and the sacred as well as the modern and the traditional. In *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion*, Mircea Eliade asserts that “*sacred and profane* are two modes of being in the world, two existential situations assumed by man in the course of his history” (Eliade 1959, 14; italics in the original). As we shall see, not only do the youth of the opening paragraph reveal this interplay but also women and the crowd – some onlookers to the cutting of the tree, a decision made by the government and implemented by workmen hired by the authorities. Interestingly, the sacred tree and its felling are the object of conflicting views that lead to contention and social unrest.

## 2 The Sacred

Some anonymous women in “The Sacred Tree” reveal the aetiology of the tree and its sacredness:

People said he [Sidi Larbi - or Sidi Daud] had planted the tree where his soul had migrated. It was also said that nobody had planted this tree, but that it had just appeared one day in the clearing, as though it had been there for years. (Zafzāf 2008, 62)

The word ‘Sidi’ in North Africa is a nomenclature of people of high social or religious status. It is also used as an epithet for Saints as is the case in Zafzāf’s text (Husni, Daniel 2008, 68). In “Sacred Groves in Morocco: A Society’s Conservation of Nature for Spiritual Reasons”, Ulrich Deil, Heike Culmsee and Mohamed Berriane note that

Orthodox Islam does not allow any veneration of saints. In contradiction, the religious practices of Moroccan Muslim societies are based on the appreciation of the spiritual authority of patron saints (Marabout or Marabut). (2007, 187)

For some, the tree in Zafzāf’s text is ostensibly what Eliade refers to as a “hierophany”, a term he uses to “designate the *act of manifestation* of the sacred”. He asserts that “[m]an becomes aware of the sacred because it manifests itself, shows itself, as something wholly different from the profane” (Eliade 1959, 11). He explains that

the history of religions - from the most primitive to the most highly developed - is constituted by a great number of hierophanies, by manifestations of sacred realities. From the most elementary hierophany - e.g., manifestation of the sacred in some ordinary object, a stone or a tree - to the supreme hierophany (which for a Christian, is the incarnation of God in Jesus Christ) there is no solution of continuity. In each case we are confronted by the same mysterious act - the manifestation of something of a wholly different order, a reality that does not belong to our world, in objects that are an integral part of our natural “profane” world. (11)

Moving to the universal, we learn from Pamela R. Freeze and S.J.M. Gray that the sacredness of a tree or of a group of trees characterises almost every culture and religion of the East and West. They write:

Trees are a form of nature that represent life and the sacred continuity of the spiritual, cosmic, and physical worlds. A tree is often used to symbolize a deity or other sacred beings, or it may stand for what is sacred in general...

The physical properties of trees are combined with the supernatural or sacred ideas, the beliefs that surround a tree's connection with what constitutes religion in different cultures....Trees represent certain deities or ancestors, serve as mediators or links to the religious realm, and are associated with cultural beliefs in heaven or the afterlife...

Through association with particular religious or historical event, an individual tree or species of tree acquires the symbolic significance of the events as part of its meaning...

A society's religious beliefs about what kinds of trees that are sacred generally depends on the nature and number of trees found in its territory. (Freeze, Gray 1995, 26)

Undoubtedly, the sacredness of the tree in Zafzāf's text does not stem from its nature, but from its association to Sidi Daud. In fact, the text does not provide any information about the genus of the tree and its physical character. The only given information about it is that it is a lonesome tree in an abandoned place, standing on a brown sandy hill-ock, in the middle of a clearing, where some construction is underway.

### **3 A Political Oppressive Force**

The arbori-culture in "The Sacred Tree" is closely linked to the political, namely a political oppressive force. In a powerful scene, full of pathos, the story intertwines the political, the natural and the human. The government's attempt to proceed with the cutting of the sacred tree leads to the assembly of a crowd and to a cordon of auxiliary security forces who form a tight circle to prevent anyone from approaching the hillock where the tree stood. One might think that their presence is to protect the tree. However, this is not the case. Quite the contrary, they are there to facilitate and speed up the task through violent means. The troops hit the crowd that has gathered behind the hedge with their batons on their shoulders and knees. This results with laments, "perhaps it was a child being trampled underfoot, desperately clinging to its mother, barefoot and covered in rags" (Zafzāf 2008, 59). One cannot but notice that oppressive force is inflicted on the weak and the poor people. It is not surprising for the author to include such a scene as

Like others in his generation (such as Muhamad Shukrī), Zafzāf gave a voice to ordinary Moroccans, especially those living on the margins of society. His is a literature of social realism, arguing the cause of those who cannot express themselves, often doing so in the local vernacular. (Husni, Newman 2008, 56-7)

Mohammed Albakry and Roger Allen in “The Literary World of Muhammad Zifzāf: Three Short Stories” concur that Zafzāf, in his short stories

is interested in realism without idealisation or romantic subjectivity, but he always exhibits sympathy for his main characters, people from different stratas of society and products of a wide variety of social, political and psychological influences. The major concern of his short stories, however, is with marginalized characters within society. (Albakry, Allen 2007, 129)

#### 4 The Sacred, the Superstitious and the Profane

Zafzāf’s text exemplifies a paradoxical facet of arbori-culture that reveals the clash between the sacred, the superstitious and the profane through the reactions of women, youngsters, the populace, and some detached onlookers to the cutting of the tree – all nameless characters. While some are in favour of the cutting of the trees, others are not. Ironically, their disapproval does not stem from their love of nature as one might expect, but from the superstition and outdated beliefs that the author manifestly endeavours to criticize.

A conversation between two women puts to the fore various facets of superstition that still permeates the minds of some. A woman, who pulls back her snotty-nosed child fearing that he will be hit by the batons of the troops, addresses another woman who is reluctant to carry a conversation. The former reveals her detachment from the sacred tree when she states: “What’s that tree got to do with us?” (Zafzāf 2008, 60). In her opinion, the government wants the curse of Sidi Daud to fall upon it. She strongly believes that not one of them will be able to sleep that night without something bad happening to them. As for the latter, she believes that the government is indifferent, as the curse will fall on those performing the task of cutting the tree. She states:

It’s the poor devils that are cutting the tree that’ll be hit by the curse. The *makhzen* keeps well clear of it. They’re always making people dig their own graves, while they make sure they’re out of harm’s way. (Zafzāf 2008, 60)

According to Husni and Newman, the *makhzen*, which literally means ‘storehouse’, stands in the peculiarly Moroccan sense of the word as “the authorities” (Husni, Newman 2008, 68). The authorities’ lack of empathy is not surprising, as the text has already put forth an image of a government that is oppressive and violent. Such oppressive political force leads the woman to fear the repercussions of her state-

ments. She realises the danger of such talk, and starts to tremble with fear, anxiously looking around. She fears that one of the agents of the government would hear the conversation and would arrest her and take her to the police station where she would be tortured: “She would be flogged and hung like a sheep from a butcher’s hook in one of the cells” (Zafzāf 2008, 60). Her priority as a widow is to feed her three children. Out of fear, in a corrective standpoint, she retorts that the government knows what it is doing, stating that it would not cut the tree without any valid reason.

The negative views and reactions towards the sacred that the tree and Sidi Daud embody, proliferate as we move on in Zafzāf’s text. On the one hand, there is the fear of being cursed by Sidi Daud. One woman asks another woman: “So, you’re not afraid of the curse of Sidi Daud? Shut your mouth or he’ll come to *you* when you’re asleep tonight!” (Zafzāf 2008, 60; italics in the original). Undoubtedly, the tree as a hierophany is for her and for some others a source of fear. On the other hand, there is a reaction of detachment and anger towards the sacred. The second woman retorts angrily that she has not done anything to Sidi Daud and that she is just a poor widow trying to take care of her children as best as she can. She leaves the crowd, as she does not want to have any problem either with the police, or with Sidi Daud whom she never saw. All the more so, as his grave was not in the clearing. More significantly, this same woman recounts that she had appealed to him only once when her husband was on his deathbed but this did not help. A few days after visiting the tree, Sidi Larbi – or Sidi Daud – had taken her husband’s soul. It is interesting to note that she believes he – and not God or illness – has taken her husband’s soul as one might think. She depicts Sidi Daud as a malevolent power. Hence, the tree as a hierophany does not have the power to avert or cure illness, contrary to trees that are represented as a source of healing in many cultures.

Some youngsters, like the two women, put forth a negative image of the sacred and ironically the natural as well. Their reactions range from mockery, indifference and the criticism of the lingering superstition in their society along with a criticism of the state. As stated earlier, the text opens with a group of youngsters with some degree of education who smile with derision and contempt. The narrator highlights their indifference in two rhetorical questions:

What did it matter to them if they cut down a tree in an abandoned place? What did it matter to them, even if it was a towering tree in a garden heavy with delicious fruit that fell because it was ripe or rotten, or remained hanging from the branches? (Zafzāf 2008, 59)

Interestingly, the youngsters’ indifference is also towards the tree as a natural element. They seem to be indifferent to both the sacred and

the profane that the tree embodies. Eliade elucidates the paradoxical nature of every hierophany, no matter how elementary it is. He states:

By manifesting the sacred, any object becomes *something else*, yet it continues to remain *itself*, for it continues to participate in its surrounding cosmic milieu. A *sacred* stone remains a *stone*; apparently (or, more precisely, from the profane point of view), nothing distinguishes it from all other stones. But for those to whom a stone reveals itself as sacred, its immediate reality is transmuted into a supernatural reality. (Eliade 1959, 12; italics in the original)

We also learn that these same youngsters were stretching themselves to have a better look at the crowd that was milling around. They did not pay any attention to the work that was going on in the middle of the clearing where the lonesome tree stood. Since these youngsters are somehow educated, one might conjecture that education leads them to criticise the quasi-religious aspect of the tree. However, this is not the case, as some poor uneducated women have also been critical. Carrying on with the conversation, one of the youngsters adds: “Fair enough, but this magical nonsense should be rooted out. They continue to worship this tree” (Zafzāf 2008, 59). His companion believes that they will worship it even more once it has been cut down. To this, the former comments: “Quite the contrary, they’ll forget all about it” (60).

The youngsters’ conversation underscores the clash between the sacred and the profane as well as tradition and modernity, another facet of arbori-culture that has its impact on people’s lives. When one of the youngsters criticises the state saying, “That’s what the state does best”, the other retorts:

What’s it to you what the state does? What do you care if they cut a tree? The day after tomorrow they’ll build a modern building, and that won’t have anything to do with you either! The money for the rent won’t go into your pocket! (59)

Paradoxically Zafzāf’s text highlights the youngsters’ detachment from modernity. More so, the narrator early on in the text, underscores the gloominess of modern architecture, pointing to concrete and darkly coloured buildings behind the tree:

Behind it, there were panels of reinforced concrete that were being carefully and slowly erected. Behind the high-rise panels, there were darkly colored buildings in which the window frames had not yet been installed, the giant gaps redolent of the gaping maws of mythical animals. (59)

## 5 The Felling of the Tree: The Populace and the Authorities

There are two antithetical standpoints and reactions towards the felling of the tree. As seen, the first part of the story incorporates dialogues of youngsters and women who are detached from the tree or have a critical stance towards the sacred and what it engenders from superstition, rituals and outdated practices. By contrast, the second reveals the populace's attachment to the tree by means of vivid and highly descriptive scenes, somehow theatrical, which are void of dialogues, with the exception of the following one.

A conversation between some onlookers watching the cutting of the tree exemplifies what Leslie Sponsel sees as components of the sacred in terms of artefacts in a special context. One onlooker believes that the next day, or the day after, a building will be constructed on the resting place of Sidi Daud's soul. In reply, someone asserts that the lingering attachment to the sacred will remain even after the cutting of the tree. He thinks that people will call it "Sidi Daud" Building" and will hand candles and amulets along its walls, thus corroborating Sponsel's definition of the sacred and how it is manifested. In "Do Anthropologists Need Religion, and Vice Versa? Adventures and Dangers in Spiritual Ecology", she points to the connection between the religious and the natural - with the sacred being a component of religion. She explains:

Religion is usually focused on the sacred as a special domain of ten contrasted with the profane or ordinary. The *sacred* includes extraordinary ideas (myths, symbols), behaviors (rituals and ceremonies), and artifacts (material culture) in special contexts (place and time). The extraordinary may involve feelings of mystery, awe, power, transcendence, tranquility, unity, and/or healing. (Sponsel 2001, 178)

Several visual scenes focus on the populace's reaction to the cutting of the tree. First, the crowd gathers in protest around the clearing during and after the cutting despite the harsh physical conditions, let alone the threat of a violent police:

The sun seared the bodies in the crowd, while the people had become unrecognizable because of the dust and debris flying around. All that could be seen were the drops of sweat glistening on their noses. The noise of the bulldozer in the clearing continued unabated. A few of the workmen were whiling away the time by playing with the ropes attached to the tree trunk. Behind them, the rifles were still trained on the crowd. A government order must be enforced to the letter. (Zafzāf 2008, 62)



It is interesting to note that the tree, during its felling, is stripped from any religious connotations. Its natural characteristics come to the fore. As a sacred object, the tree was a source of fear for some, and so it is as a natural element:

Then, the trunk and branches could be heard to crack, and the tree fell to the ground. Some of the workmen let go of the ropes and ran off. Behind them, the policemen also beat a hasty retreat. None of them felt like having their eyes poked out by a falling branch. (62)

Subsequently, the cutting of the tree leads to more than a simple protest. It leads to social unrest and clashes between the security cordon that turns its attention to the people in a threatening manner. Still, the felling of the tree attracts even more people, some leaving their shops to see what was going on, some at a distance and others close by. The text also zooms in on the arrival of two cars that stop before the crowd. The police chief goes out of one of them, preceded by a few of his men, who set about clearing a path for him. His arrival triggers feelings of shock among the people. Some begin to curse him in a very quiet voice, while the police officers lash out in every direction.

As stated earlier, the arbori-culture in Zafzāf's text is closely linked to the political. The arrival of the chief police to the site where the sacred tree stood reinforces the interplay between the natural, the political and the social. In a very powerful scene, we see the contrast between those who lose their composure (the people and the soldiers) and the calmness of the police chief:

The party was surrounded by a cloud of dust. Only the police chief knew how important it was to appear cool and indifferent. The slightest movement could trigger no end of unrest and chaos, especially in matters as sensitive as this one. Dust flew up. Then, there were cries, and the fleeting movement of batons and rifle butts. All this was necessary at such a time. (64)

What follows is a commentary on political rulers, though Husni and Newman, the translators of the short story at hand assert that Zafzāf is not a political writer; he simply foregrounds many aspects of his county's contemporary society. They state:

this is no pamphlet or treatise dressed up as a work of fiction. Rather, it is fiction with a social conscience, drawn from real-life events; the realism is palpable and the narrative enthralling, with tragedy often commingled with comedy. (Husni, Daniel 2008, 57)

Nonetheless, one can neither ignore the comments on political rulers that are highlighted in "The Sacred Tree", nor their universal valid-

ity, thus giving this part of the story the characteristics of a somehow political pamphlet:

The biggest ruler in the world only has to do one thing – to keep his nerves under control. The greatest head of government, whether minister, police chief or whatever, all of them have to make sure of only one thing, namely keeping themselves under control. (Zafzāf 2008, 64)

The political commentaries clearly posit a contrast between those who implement orders and any head of state. Whereas the former lose control, the latter retains his composure, thus revealing a superior nature, which in reality is nothing but an appearance of composure. Clearly, the text underscores the hypocritical nature of leaders in a satirical manner:

However, those who receive orders do not control themselves. Sometimes they, of their own accord, think they are enforcing an order that has come down to them. Any head of state is capable of receiving a slap in the face and still continue smiling in front of television cameras. People will admire him precisely because he did not react the way they would have done, indeed, as they do for the slightest thing. However, when the camera lights are not trained on him, that very same leader can just as easily give the order to destroy tens of cities. Afterwards, he will hold grand speeches, cloaking himself in the innocence of one who respects his fellow man. (64)

Moving away from universalities, the text zooms in again on the police chief's composure, despite the ongoing commotion and violence, in an attempt to perhaps validate the comments stated above.

Arms and voices rose, with rifle butts piercing the sky, sometimes hitting a baton or a skull. There were screams, faces oozing with blood, bodies collapsing to the ground. The police chief never made the slightest movement; he tried to prepare himself for when he would become a minister, standing in front of a television camera. (*Stand firm! The hour of vengeance is near, and you will be able to destroy tens of cities.*). (64; italics in the original)

With the focus on the political, the tree and its sacredness seem to have seeped into the background, except for a reference to the crowd that is described as “those people who worshipped this tree”, and to their feelings towards its cutting: “Feelings of anger, fear, hatred, courage and cowardice enveloped the tree that lay lifeless on the ground” (66). Nonetheless, it is the characteristic of the tree as a hi-

erophany that leads to the violent upheaval, thus foregrounding the sacredness of the tree in an indirect manner. A scene describes the dust that covers the police chief's face as well as the crowd's face. Still the chief does not lose his composure and retains his stern smile. Even when a stone from an unknown source lands on his head and fractures his skull, he retains the smile on his lips. He sinks into the dust covered in a pool of dust and soil. What follows is undoubtedly reminiscent of war scenes:

The troops opened fire. Stones were flying through the air, heavy with dust. Shots rang out, though no one knew where they were coming from. Bodies fell; others fled, scattering in every direction, pushing and shoving one another. A cloud of dust rose up. It was a fully-fledged battle, total chaos. (66)

The war scene, with bullets flying everywhere, is overshadowed by the focus on the police chief:

Everything became blurred: the laments, the weeping and dying screams. The police chief's lips still had a smile on them, despite the blood and soil, as though tens of cameras were crowded around him in order to get a shot of him. (66)

The story ends with the people dispersing out of fear. Fear permeates the story from beginning to end, whether it is the fear of the curse of Sidi Daud or the oppressive political power.

The people began to disperse. The narrow streets became empty as the doors and windows dotted along the haphazardly built walls were shut. Eyes appeared through the chinks and crannies in the walls, windows and doors. However, these eyes did not see anything except the troops, spread out across the clearing or posted at the entrance of the maze of squalid alleyways in which the sewage and garbage had amassed.

Some shopkeepers, greengrocers, spice merchants and other small traders left their goods in order to take shelter wherever they could. A few old women who sold henna, herbs, locally produced soap and various magic paraphernalia such as rats' tails, and crows' heads, scattered in every direction, abandoning their wares on the pavement. (66)

Zafzāf does not fail, once again, to paint an image of society governed by a distorted image of the sacred. It is also governed by a hypocritical self-absorbed political power represented by the chief lying on the soil, still smiling as though nothing has happened, summoning the police officers to take him to one of the cars.

## 6 Conclusion

One might conjecture that Zafzāf's aim in this short story is to instigate some social change through what Ross Chambers labels, in *Room for Maneuver: Reading Oppositional Narrative*, "a politics of oppositionality". This politics is a form of resistance available to the relatively disempowered. In Chambers' view, "Oppositionality seeks, that is, to shift desire from forms that enslave to forms that liberate" (Chambers 1991, xvii). He believes that "such change is the phenomenon that occurs when one reads a book – whether a work of fiction or not – and is 'influenced,' that is changed, by it" (xi-xii). He suggests that

such "influence" is best accounted for as that which brings about a change in *desire* – the further implication being that to change what people desire is, in the long run, the way to change without violence the way things are. (xii; italics in the original)

Perhaps Zafzāf wants his readers to have a change of desire that would lead them to abolish the superstition and outdated beliefs that still take hold of his society or any other society.

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