
THE TREE AND ITS SYMBOLIC SIGNIFICANCE IN THE FOLK EPIC OF KING SAYF IBN DHĪ YAZAN

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ABSTRACT: *Trees bear a range of meanings in people's beliefs, and this is reflected in literature, particularly folk literature. Some groups of people have worshipped trees during certain periods, and tree worship was part of totemic religion. This paper examines the symbolic meanings of the tree in the Epic of Sayf Ibn Dhī Yazan, one of the classics of folk literature. Three areas of meaning are considered: the mythological, the psychological, and the Islamic. This semantic richness may owe to the fact that the Epic covers a broad range of times and places, while its events combine the realistic with the fantastical.*

KEYWORDS: folk epic, tree, symbolic significance, Totemism, Sayf Ibn Dhī Yazan, Arabic culture.

INTRODUCTION

A well-known and lengthy folk tale, the Epic of King Sayf ibn Dhi Yazan was written in the fourteenth century CE (Khorshid 2002). It is packed with mythological elements and supernatural worlds featuring jinn, demons, magic, time travel, and strange places and is characterized by the miraculous and the heroic. Trees are part of these fantastical worlds, which occupy a symbolic space in relation to people. This relationship is an unusual one marked by mythological, religious, and psychological dimensions that reflect the development of human beliefs in ancient societies.

Trees formed a key part of religious ritual in totemism, an ancient religion that invested the relationship between humans, animals and plants with a mythical and creedal dimension. Guardians of the totem were believed to be the hybrid offspring of humans and plants or animals; therefore, they were viewed as sacred and, by virtue of this status, they were able to influence people and put them to use, while providing grounding for their social hierarchy and identity. Additionally, the totem was believed to be the ancestor of the tribe or clan, so the relationship between them was one of kinship. From this originated the worship of plants and animals. The Qur'an mentions the companions of the *aykah*, which was a tree that was worshipped. Similarly, it is related in the Biography of the Prophet that Khālid ibn al-Walīd cut down a tree near the goddess al-ʿUzzā that had been worshipped in pre-Islamic times. Al-Ṭabari records conflicting opinions regarding the term al-ʿUzzā itself. According to one view, it referred to bushes, and according to another, it referred to a white stone (al-Khatib 2004).

Sigmund Freud held that in dreams the tree stood for the maternal and the mother-son relationship, which he called the Oedipus complex. From a psychoanalytical perspective there is a connection between totemism and the Oedipus complex which explains the main taboos in totemic worship.

We will see how Freud interprets this relationship, and how this is reflected in literary and imaginative terms in the texts considered here.

The Qur'an refers to special features of certain trees, for example, *shajarat al-khuld* (the tree of eternity, Qur'an 20:120) from which Adam and Eve ate, causing them to be expelled from Paradise; *sidrat al-muntahā* (the far lote tree of Paradise, Qur'an 53:14–16) which is referred to in the context of Muhammad's night journey and ascension to heaven; and the *tūbā* or blessing tree which is described in the Qur'an as "extensive of shade" (Qur'an 56:30). In contrast, there is the *zaqqūm* tree in Hell, whose fruits are described as resembling the heads of demons (Qur'an 37: 62–63).

In his work *Shajarat al-Kawn* (The Tree of Being), Ibn 'Arabī takes a philosophical approach to the tree consistent with his mystical vision ((Mubayyadayn and Muqabalah 2012).

What, then, are the traditional sources referred to when making use of the tree in the Epic of Sayf Ibn Dhī Yazan? What is the symbolic significance of the tree for the overall literary meaning of the text? In what follows we shall attempt to answer these two questions based on an analysis and discussion of passages from this folk epic in terms of their mythological, psychological, and religious dimensions.

The Tree in Mythology

One of the ways in which the Epic of King Sayf Ibn Dhī Yazan creates the fantastical is through a phantasmagorical presentation of trees' natural elements. Such phantasmagorical features are not found in the real world, and thus can be seen as a gap between external and textual reality, as well as a gap between reader and text (Taha, 1993).

Examples of these unfamiliar formulations are descriptions of the tree's fruit as having a male or female human form or the ability to speak. Other fantastical descriptions depict the fruit as having the capacity to return to its previous form after being eaten, and humans as being able to have sexual relations with fruit that takes a female form.

In his quest for *Munyat al-Nufūs* (literally, Hearts' Desire), the possessor of the robe of feathers who lives beyond the seven islands or the land of Wāq al-Wāq, King Sayf in the company of the giant Khayraqan comes across strange trees that are:

"as tall as the eye can see, with leaves that dazzle the eye, and whose fruits are beautiful girls suspended by their hair and being are blown about by the wind" (*Epic of King Sayf Ibn Dhī Yazan*, Vol. 2, n.d.: 12, henceforth, *Epic*).

There are also fruits in the form of young and old males and in the form of virginal women. When a fruit falls, it lives for three days and then dies. When it gets dark, the fruits cry out loudly, "*Wāq wāq, subhān al-malik al-khallāq -- Wāq wāq, praise to the King and Creator!*" (*Epic*, n.d).

When King Sayf becomes hungry and asks his giant companion for food, the giant responds, "O King, what food on Earth could be better than these girls? It could not be tastier than these women."

(*Epic*, n.d: 13). And in fact, Sayf eats from these fragrant human-like fruits, which taste like fresh walnuts and are sweeter than honey.

However, King Sayf's relationship with these trees with the human-like fruit goes beyond this to his having sexual intercourse with them. On another island, there are trees whose fruit takes the form of women who are "sexually alluring and more pleasurable than human women" (*Epic*, n.d: 22). The giant brings King Sayf one of these fruits, and we are told that "he looked at the maiden, and as he had been away from his wives for a while, it is said that he had intercourse with her in that place as ordained by the King and Judge. (However), it is (also) said that he turned away and did not do so out of reverence for God" (*Epic*, n.d: 22).

The Epic relates that King Sayf regretted what he had done, which he considered a wicked act, and that he admonished the giant. He then ritually washed, performed ablutions, and turned to God in penitence, seeking His forgiveness.

On the fifth island King Sayf and the giant come across trees whose fruit is "like human heads with eyes, noses, mouths, hair, and necks, but without bodies. However, they praise God even though they are fruits. People come to this island to buy these fruits when they are ripe, which happens at a known time, and they eat nothing else" (*Epic*, n.d: 23).

The various functions ascribed to these fruits present them as food for nourishment, bodies for sexual contact, and beings that praise God. Perhaps the latter two functions are characteristically human: the need for sex and language are components of life and human communication. Sayf's separation from humanity and his being accompanied by the giant Khayraqan, who is a jinni, embodies his need for linguistic communication with people. That the trees speak is an appropriate expression of this missing channel of communication.

King Sayf's absence from his wives and his search for his wife Munyat al-Nufūs point to his unfulfilled sexual desires, as do the imaginative projections of his instinctive needs via the trees with female fruits. The theme of sexual contact between humans and plants/animals leads us on to totemistic practices, where the totem is understood as the ancestor of the tribe or clan such that they share blood kinship or a common origin (Freud 1983).

In the company of a supernatural being, Sayf Ibn Dhī Yazan goes on a quest to find his wife Munyat al-Nufūs, who lives on the Island of Girls, one of the Wāq al-Wāq Islands, a faraway place beyond the borders of the known world. In contrast, her uncle lives with his people on the Island of Men. There is war between the two islands, and it is not possible for males and females to meet. This separation between the sexes represents a form of homosexuality, since there is no possibility of sexual contact between males and females within their respective geographical locations. On the islands on the way to these locations there are mythical trees whose fruits take male or female form, and which one must pass before reaching either of the two sexually segregated cities. These fantastical trees embody the two sexes and the need for physical union between them. However, it appears that the notion of sex between members of tribes who had once been a single tribe was a fundamental taboo in totemistic belief (Freud, 1983). The possibility of sex depends on individuals

belonging to different totems. Munyat al-Nufūs has sex with King Sayf before she flees to her father's city, since they do not belong to the same tribe or clan, that is, the same belief. The various elements of these trees thus constitute a symbolic equivalent of the familiar human world and its reproductive potential based on a religious-mythic belief.

The relationship between trees and human beings may also be viewed as symbolizing the sexual bond based on a reading of Adam and Eve's relationship with the tree of life. In some interpretations, Adam and Eve's consumption of the fruit of the forbidden tree means that they have had sexual relations, which also marks the beginning of the notion of immortalizing the human race through their ongoing genetic propagation via reproduction. (Hence the tree's being termed "the tree of eternity.") This is clearly stated in al-Alūsī's commentary, where the tree is said to be the tree of love, or the tree of nature and passion (al-Alūsī 1970). Similarly, Sadr al-Muta'allihin al-Shirazi in his commentary on the same verse says that it is the tree of amorous love (al-Shirazi 1947).

King Sayf's union with the totem tree supports this idea and, at the same time, expresses another principle of totemism, which is that sexual relations between kings or men of religion and their totem is what connects them by blood kinship or common origin. This second idea represents an attempt to portray aspects of King Sayf's sanctification and power. The priest or the king represents the ancestors or the origin resulting from sexual union between humans and the totem. This imparts sacred status to the hybrid offspring, enabling him rule over those who share in totemistic belief.

King Sayf's remorse at having had sex with the female fruit is at the heart of the taboos in totemic law. Someone who commits such an act against the totem for individual pleasure rather than collective purposes, such as sacrifice or presenting the totem as an offering, must mitigate the offence of breaking the taboo through various incantations and other magical practices (Freud 1983). The Epic relates that King Sayf performs religious rites such as ablution, purification, and seeking forgiveness, which correspond to primitive totemic rituals that atone for a transgression.

The tree from a psychoanalytical perspective

The totem animal is believed to be the beginner of life of the tribe. The tribal people believe that there is some supernatural and mystic relationship among the member of the same totem (Goswami, 2018). Freud holds that the origin of totemism is the Oedipus complex: "If the totem animal is the father, then the two main commandments of totemism, the two taboo rules which constitute its nucleus – not to kill the totem animal and not to use a woman belonging to the same totem for sexual purposes – agree in content with the two crimes of Oedipus, who slew his father and took his mother to wife" (Freud 1983: 159).

However, readers of the Epic of King Sayf will also note the unnatural relationship between him and his mother Qamriyah. There is a hostile relationship in which the mother tries to take revenge against her son and sets traps for him to kill him so that he does not rival her rule. This hostile

relationship begins at birth, when she casts the child into the valley of death and a deer suckles the baby (Epic, n.d: 169).

King Sayf's relationship with the tree and the deer should be reinterpreted from the perspective of dreams. Works of dream interpretation refer to the appearance of trees in a dream as standing for the mother-son relationship. Fruit in female form is the desire of the oedipal imagination for a sexual relationship with the mother, although in this case it is an expression not of the existing situation, but of what is missing.

The role of the deer which suckles the child is that of the mother, as well as a reference to the totemic relationship between man and animal. The deer is compensation for the child Sayf's having been deprived of his mother, as is sex with an animal or fruits in female form; as such, it symbolizes the Oedipus complex.

These animal and plant totems' link with humans represents the psychological relationship associated with the Oedipus complex. The slaying of the father is not present in the Epic on the level of events, but on the dream level as represented by the trees that bear heads without bodies (the head in a dream stands for the father). Cutting off the head embodies points to an oedipal desire to kill the father which cannot be fulfilled in reality, but which is compensated for in this fantastical journey through a world of magic, jinn, and myth.

Visiting such places in folk literature represents a kind of fantasy or dream in which the author creates an imaginary reality as a stage on which to enact a psychological drama that would be highly unlikely to transpire in reality (Khorshid 1991).

King Sayf's experience of having been deprived of his parents has become deeply engrained in his psyche, so these magical worlds are an outlet and stage for his psychological needs. At the same time, this confirms that such folk literary works have deep roots in mythology and legend, and are not merely fantastical tales to amuse the reader or listener.

The tree from an Islamic perspective

Trees are mentioned in the Qur'an and the Bible, and both refer to the utility of trees for food, animal feed, oil and wood fuel (including charcoal) and construction work (Musselman, 2003).

There are studies that have taken the scientific aspect of trees and plants in the Qur'an, in terms of their classifications, uses, biological nature, and their relationship to the elements of nature, photosynthesis and others (Khafagi et al., 2006).

"Beyond mention of their utility, trees are important in both of these holy books as symbol and metaphor. In the two books, the good tree is equated with a good person and the bad tree with a bad person" (Ibid, p. 48).

Both uses: the physical and the symbolic of the tree, constitute the basis for the analysis of what trees represent in the folk Epic of King Sayf Ibn Dhī Yazan, and the symbolic aspect in particular.

The sources for tree symbolism in the Epic of King Sayf Ibn Dhī Yazan cannot be restricted to ancient myth and legend or a psychoanalytical reading. The Epic, which was narrated for centuries after the advent of Islam, certainly derived many features, images, linguistic elements, scenes, and events from the new religion, and King Sayf himself represents a type of Islamic preacher against the camp of non-belief.

Appearing in the Mameluke period, the Epic was composed against the background of a religious conflict between Islam and Christianity in Ethiopia during the reign of King Sayf Arḥad in the aftermath of the Crusades (Sharim 2006), and so takes on a prominent Islamic character.

We can see the tree as a powerful and almost universal symbol of life in the ancient myths of many peoples around the world. The biography of the tree linked their human and sacred condition with the divine and sacred realm. Early on, theologians adopted this idea to shed light on some of the major mysteries in Christianity. Salvation through the cross expanded the ancient idea of cosmic regeneration symbolized by the Tree of the World, given the early Christian connection between the Tree in Eden and the Cross of Christ. As the tree of Christ's sacrifice, that is, the tree of pain and salvation, the cross was identified with the cosmic tree at the centre of the world (Simor, 2000).

From this point of view, decorating the tree is related to Christmas, and coincides with the birth of Christ, for Christ is the new Adam, and the tree of knowledge that Adam prevented from eating its fruits in heaven, was that wooden cross that made the idea of the crucifixion of Christ a symbol of redemption, due to the first sin.

Returning to one passage of the Epic of King Sayf Ibn Dhī Yazan, Qamriyah tries to deceive her son Sayf and makes him believe that she has hidden his father's treasure in a far-off place in the desert. She goes out with him alone with the intention of killing him. They journey for three days and reach "a large everlasting tree that gave shade to the knight and a hundred (soldiers), with high branches as though supporting canopies with columns and poles. King Sayf looked at the tree, which was bigger than all others and had no flowers or fruit. He marveled at its shape and at God's handiwork, and was certain that God had power over all things. The two of them went over to the tree and found a spring beneath it. They drank from it and got off their horses and let them graze. They sat in the shade of the tree" (Epic, n.d: 168-169).

The description of the tree as everlasting gives it an aura of sacredness, since God is everlasting. The holy trees mentioned in the Qur'an are *sidrat al-muntahā*, the tree of eternity, and the *tūbā* tree (one of the trees of Paradise) which is described as having "extended shade" (Qur'an 56:30). Other trees are mentioned in other contexts.

It may be gathered from the text cited above that the description of the tree, which "shades a knight and a hundred (soldiers)." fits that of the *tūbā* tree mentioned in the Qur'an. Abū Hurayrah relates that the Prophet said:

"In Paradise there is a tree in whose shade a rider could continue for one hundred years without reaching the end of it. The phrase 'extended shade' is to be read in this way"

(al-Bukhari 2003: 507).

Sayf and Qamriyah sit under the tree for shade, and the presence of the spring beneath it invokes the image of Paradise and the trees with rivers flowing under them.

The Hadiths about this tree indicate that it is a tree of Paradise from whose leaves the people of Paradise make their clothing. This agrees with its description in the Epic as having no flowers or fruit but only leaves. The reference to the absence of flowers and fruits lends prominence to the leaves and foreshadows their importance for treating and curing King Sayf as related in the Epic. Qamriyah strikes her son Sayf four times with a sword and leaves him covered in blood. However, God sends two birds (the characters ʿAbd al-Salām and Jiyād) who land on the tree and discuss how to treat King Sayf’s wounds.

“The leaves of this tree when chewed by a man turn into a paste that if applied to a wound will close it at once, even if it has been there for years (Epic, n.d: 171).

This medical use of the tree takes us to folk medicine and the medical practices of the Prophet, which included the use of plants (Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyah, n.d.: 22-24, 117).

The tree represents the unseen world, which is there to protect and aid King Sayf in dangerous circumstances. This reflects the spirit and principles of Islam in aiding believers. According to the Epic, King Sayf was a hanif (monotheist) in the path of the prophet Ibrāhīm. Divine providence guided him wherever he went, and he travelled to and fro calling others for Islam (Yaqtin 1997).

The analogy with the *ṭūbā* tree is a clear representation of this metaphysical world, as is the correspondence between the role of the leaves and the presence of the spirits (the two birds) who perch on the tree and discuss the idea of the leaves as a cure in order to teach King Sayf. This is an intertextual reference to Cain’s killing of Abel, where two ravens appear and fight for the opportunity to teach Cain how to hide his slain brother’s naked body in the ground (Qur’an 5:27-37).

The scene is, overall, Islamic and Qur’anic in tone. Hence, religious sources have a powerful presence in the Epic, which has clearly been influenced by Islamic concepts as conveyed in the Qur’an and the Hadith.

Summary and conclusion

In the Epic of King Sayf Ibn Dhī Yazan, the tree appears in different symbolic contexts rooted in mythological, psychological, and religious sources and conceptions which have informed fantastical Arabic narratives as a whole (Manqour 2015).

The totemic context is prominent in mythological sources, where ancient doctrinal practices and rites serve as an expression of the central taboos in totemic belief. The Oedipal context appears in the psychological sources, where King Sayf’s relationship with the tree is an expression of a dream-like imagination representing his actual experience of having been deprived of his mother. As for the Islamic context, it appears in religious sources, where the scenes of Paradise and its magical worlds are evoked against a background of relief after adversity, King Sayf is granted

victory as a figure of faith who follows the religion of Ibrāhīm and treats his wounds with the tree's leaves in a form of folk medicine.

This rich symbolism associated with the tree is due to the importance of the tree in people's beliefs over the ages, particularly in fictional works close to people's lives such as folk literature. One such work of folk literature is the Epic of Sayf Ibn Dhī Yazan, which is full of the historical, the fantastical, legend, and folk belief.

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