

## *Full Length Research Paper*

# **Pilgrimage to old olive trees and saint veneration in North Africa.**

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Just as many North African Muslims perform *ziyāra*, or short local pilgrimages, to saints' graves, olive farmers in South Tunisia also perform *ziyāra* to old olive trees as sacred sites. There, they observe harvest festivals and rites of passage and make personal petitions. Based on the results of my fieldwork, this paper examines this practice in an Amazigh community that I will call Village T, a particularly traditional and conservative village where *ziyāra* to olive trees is preserved. As *ziyāra* to olive trees is described by participants with ambiguous and obscure references to saints, spirits, or ancestors, the object of veneration is an olive-saint complex, revealing that archaic factors from outside Islam influence their belief and practice. The practice is an example of how the veneration of trees, spirits, ancestors, and the earth mother can survive within monotheism as saint veneration. Pilgrimage to olive-saint complexes is an agricultural ritual in which the experience of the tree's presence awakens a sense of cosmogony and of healing and renewal in troubled times. The veneration of olive-saint complexes represents an experience of the world's renewal through contact with the sacred through the peculiar symbolism of old olive trees.

**Keywords:** olive farming, saint veneration, pilgrimage, sacred site, Amazigh culture

## **INTRODUCTION**

*No wonder spirits dwelt in these trees, I thought to myself.*      *It was only another way of saying the trees were spirits themselves, divine, living things, symbols, yes, and*

vessels too, of unseen spiritual forces. *De Bunsen* (1910, p. 242)

Cultivation of the olive (*Olea europaea*) in the Mediterranean basin has been practiced for about six millennia and has supported the lives of people in various cultural contexts. It shapes lives not only as a means of food, but also as a commodity, a tool, a motif of poetry, and a ritualistic object. In North Africa, olive farming has become integrated with the practice of saint veneration within Islam, and exists today in the unique form of pilgrimage to old olive trees. The aim of this research was to identify the cultural/religious values of the religious phenomenon of visiting olive trees from the perspective of the theory of symbolism in history of religions. The findings are based on my fieldwork on the rituals, agriculture, and customs of a village in South Tunisia, which I implemented intermittently between 2014 and 2017. I found that sacred old olive trees are regarded as manifestations of supernatural power in natural objects, and that the religious veneration of trees, which is pre-Islamic in origin, is expressed within Islam in the form of saint veneration. This allows us to shed light on the essential aspect of saint veneration as Rudolf Otto's idea of "Das Ganz Andere" (wholly other)<sup>1</sup>, a perspective that has not previously been discussed with regard to saint veneration in Islam. This study reveals the symbolical function of old olive trees in North Africa and their role in enabling the people to have total experience of pre-Islamic and Islamic values through short local pilgrimage.

### Issues of Saint Veneration and Natural Objects

<sup>1</sup> Otto, 1936, pp. 25-30

Saint veneration in the form of pilgrimage to saints' mausoleums is found everywhere in North Africa, from the largest cities to the midst of the desert. In Tunisia, following the Jasmin revolution in 2011, many mausoleums of famous Muslim saints have suffered destruction by salafists inspired by the rise of the Ennahda Movement Party<sup>2</sup>. As a result, many popular festivals dedicated to saints that once attracted many people have been cancelled in recent years to avoid violent attacks by salafists. Because the mausoleums of famous saints in cities are often strongly connected with Sufism and its dominant sects, they are widely respected during peacetime. In the present rapid shift toward Islamic fundamentalism, however, they are the first sacred sites to be attacked. Elsewhere, however, there are numerous sacred sites to local saints that are known by a very limited number of people, and the veneration of these saints and their sites is far from the control of Sufism and from systematized sects. In particular, the veneration of trees as saints' shrines (*mazār* pl. *mazārāt*) or as saints themselves has remained on the periphery of saint veneration in Islam, with little support or intervention from national religious policy.

Previous studies on saint veneration in Islam can be briefly categorized into three groups according to the approach they take: the study of Islamic thought, the history of Islam, and the anthropology of Islam<sup>3</sup>. The first of these examines the philosophies of the various saints as intellectuals according to Islamic theology. The second examines historical descriptions of saint

<sup>2</sup> Benoit-Lavelle, 2013

<sup>3</sup> Akahori, 2005

veneration or the ways in which it has intersected with Islamic law. The third examines the process and characteristics of saint veneration in recent times. Akahori has criticized the standpoint of setting Sufism as the standard for saint veneration of Islam and of regarding other aspects as the incidental or popularized elements of Sufism. He pointed out the necessity of interpreting other aspects as distinct phenomena, though they are certainly closely connected. The local saints mentioned in this paper are natural objects as well as local ancestors or local saints, whereas the famous Sufi saints are historical figures known universally in Maghreb countries. The problem of studying saint veneration is the confusion of "subjective sainthood," i.e., the wisdom or spiritual advancement of the saints themselves, with "objective sainthood," i.e., the religious mentality of followers. Although these should be discussed separately, they are typically treated as equivalent. Scholars tend to regard objective sainthood as a corruption of subjective sainthood when a saint's veneration is due to his/her subjective sainthood. Objective sainthood, which is based on interpretations of saints developed through the experiences of followers who have requested them to mediate with God, clearly has different logic and mechanisms from "subjective sainthood," which is based on the relationship between the individual saint and God through philosophical and spiritual training. Examples of saint veneration linked to natural objects such as stones or trees help us understand the mindset of people who attribute to a saint a level of sacredness beyond a saint's personal ability or contribution as a human being.

Dermenghem has discussed sainthood ascribed to both saints and natural objects based on the

examples of trees, stones, caves, water sources, and hot springs in North Africa, and has claimed that a tree, for example, can be sacralized due to its position in a location mentioned in the legend of a saint rather than by any observable characteristic of the tree itself. The sacredness of such a tree is thus reduced to the antecedent action of a saint, as in the case of the sacralized tree in which Sidi Moussa, according to legend, once sat.<sup>4</sup> While the practice of ascribing sacredness to natural objects is often explained in a simplified and chronological manner like this, the experience of the sacred at such a site is more complex and synchronistic. It is also necessary to mention that the understanding of a particular object as sacred is sometimes inherited from previous religious traditions. Robertson Smith showed the dynamism of transformation from one religion to another, stating that, when a new religion takes a form that is decidedly anthropomorphic or astral, myths are devised to reconcile the new point of view with the old usages, but the substance of the ritual remains unchanged.<sup>5</sup> People frequently use new frameworks to authorize the pre-existing sacredness of things. It could lead the situation as Westermarck has described, "when the saint is an entirely obscure personage, as he often is in such cases, we have good reason to suppose that his shrine owes its existence to the grove rather than the grove to the shrine; and the same is the case when the latter is situated underneath a large or curiously shaped tree".<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Dermenghem, 1954, p. 138

<sup>5</sup> Smith, 1889, p. 168

<sup>6</sup> Westermarck, 1926, i. pp. 74-75

As confirmed in the present study, therefore, the more obscure the saint's personality in a natural object-saint complex, the more important the tradition of the natural object's inherent sacredness.

It must be stated that reducing the sacredness of natural object-saint complexes only to the mainstream religious expressions of the modern day is likely to introduce bias, and also that the explanations of certain practices offered by our informants are likely to suffer from the same bias. People try to explain their customs in the framework of saint veneration because it is easy. Therefore, it is necessary not only to ask them to explain the meaning of their practices, but also to consider their religious experience of saints and natural objects through rituals, folklore, and daily expressions of symbolism.

In Section 4 of this paper, we will discuss how pilgrimage to old olive trees relates to both saint veneration and the symbolism of trees, and discuss people's sensitivity to nature and the sacred. In many cases, olive trees are regarded as saints themselves though are previously considered shrines to saints by scholars. Such trees have individual names, and people often mix up the saints with spirits residing in the vicinity of these trees. Because the people in Village T do not practically distinguish between saints as natural objects and saints as historical figures, they visit, pray, and offer sacrifices in the same manner to natural objects as they do to historical figures. Thus, pilgrimage to olive trees can be understood not as deviation of official saint veneration, but as one of the diversified forms of saint veneration owing to syncretic absorption of pre-Islamic religious influences.

### Olive-Related Customs and Tree Worship in the Mediterranean Basin and Arabia

Although the worship of natural objects is regarded as *bid'a* (heresy) in Quranic teachings, customs involving the symbolic usage of natural objects have been accepted and legitimized through integration into the forms of saint veneration that are admitted by Islam. Not all folklore involving natural objects is associated with Islam, and some natural objects are simply said to possess "power" in a more primitive sense. Westermarck reported the prevailing custom among Amazigh communities in Morocco to sacrifice animal if the heap of grain or olive oil is increasing. This phenomenon is called *qazqua* (excess of *baraka*) and believed to be caused by dangerous power of Jinn. Without sacrifice, the family of the farmer will be in danger of death<sup>7</sup>. If the power is interpreted in a positive light, this "power" can be regarded as *baraka* (blessing), *mleika* (angel), or *wali* (saint) in accordance with orthodoxy. In a negative light, it is regarded as *qazqua* (excess of *baraka*), *jinn* (spirit), or *mejnūn* (possessed)<sup>8</sup>. The phenomenon itself, however, is mostly ambiguous or neutral.

According to the abundant records of folklore and customs collected in Morocco by Westermarck, some of the customs related to olives are clearly influenced by Islam, such as "good names of Allah written with olive leaves"<sup>9</sup> and "olive tree as a sign of the

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<sup>7</sup> *Ibid*, i. p. 48, *Idem*, 1913, pp.38-39

<sup>8</sup> *Idem*, 1926, i. p. 48

<sup>9</sup> *Idem*, 1933, p. 109

saint's grave"<sup>10</sup>. Many of these customs also have folk religious elements, however, involving such things as wishing for babies, healing, exorcism, or magical power. I observed most of these folk religious elements, with some variations, during my fieldwork in Tunisia between 2014 and 2017. In addition to the concept of the "olive tree as a sign of a saint's grave," which will be discussed in more detail below, I also noted belief in the purifying power of olive trees, specifically "jinn avoid a person with an olive stick," as seen in the use of a forked olive branch as a talisman against evil eyes (Touza) and in the folklore of a saint who killed a snake by pointing at it with an olive stick (Beni Khedache), as well as belief in the link between olive trees and fertility, as seen in the ceremonial *mutreq* (stick) made of olive wood that is carried by a groom (Village T). The *mutreq* is carried by the groom during wedding ceremonies to show his "manhood" and placed in the bedroom on the wedding night. The *mutreq* is deeply related to symbolism of fertility and is evidently the symbol of the male sexual organ and his ability to procreate. There are many such customs linking fertility to olive trees in Tunisia. During the wedding ceremony, for example, old olive fruits that are said to have lots of *baraka* are gifted to unmarried girls wishing to be married soon. Olive oil is drunk not only by pregnant woman for easy delivery but also by men as an aphrodisiac<sup>11</sup>. "Pilgrimage to old olive trees for human and earthy fertility," and the "custom of tying

rags to old olive trees" are seen in Tunisia as well as in Morocco<sup>12</sup>.

These customs and beliefs related to olive trees are similar to those related to tree worship in the pre-monotheistic era throughout the Mediterranean and the Orient. Robertson Smith has shown, with plenty of references, that "tree worship pure and simple, where the tree is in all respects treated as a god," has been practiced in the Middle East<sup>13</sup>. One example of tree worship in Arabia is the sacred date-palm at Nejran, which was adored and hung with fine clothes and women's ornaments at an annual feast. The symbolism of this tree survives ambivalently as a rich source of religiosity though it is also attacked as heresy and a threat to the uniqueness of the Monotheistic God.

Doughty has described holy groves called *menhel* in southwestern Arabia where the dead are buried and, according to historical Bedouin thought, spirits or angels descend. Living people would visit these groves to be healed by sleeping there, and would sometimes report hearing music, speech, and the footsteps of spirits. If a person were to "pluck any bough, he should be caught away in the air, and be seen no more; or forgetting his mind, be driven continually, without eating or drinking, through the *khala* (desert)"<sup>14</sup>. Strikingly similar beliefs and folklore are seen in South Tunisia, as discussed below. In another example reported by Doughty, "the sick person will sacrifice a

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10 *Idem*, 1926, i. p. 68

11 The best portion of first-pressed olive oil, called *ndough*, is used for such procreative purposes (With my fieldwork in Sousse, Zarzis, Tozeur, village T et. al.).

12 Westermarck, 1926, i. pp. 75-76

13 Smith, op.cit., pp. 169-176

14 Doughty, 1921, i. pp. 448-449

sheep, for his health, or a goat, with blood-sprinkling. He cooks the flesh in the place, and divides it to his friends, and leaves some hanging upon the branches: then he lies down to slumber full of his superstitious faith that the *melaika* (angel) will descend upon him in vision, and speak precepts for his health”<sup>15</sup>. The trees identified as possessed are hung with many offerings, including old beads, votive shreds of calico, and strips of colored cloth. Dafni has reviewed these customs and found that the predominant reasons for tying rags to trees include the transfer of disease to the tree, the desire to leave a sign of one’s visit, and attempts to soothe the spirit of the tree (2002 : 325). In Morocco, in contrast, Westermarck reports that, by tying hair or a piece of cloth to a sacred object, the petitioner expects to gain its *baraka*. According to him, “the very conspicuous prevalence of tree-worship, under the most transparent disguise of human sainthood, among the Berber-speaking population of Morocco” has been practiced since before the influence of Arab culture (1973:79).

Among sacred trees, olive trees are a popular object of veneration in North Africa (Dermenghem), and the custom of tying rags to them is still practiced in Tunisia in order to wish for a baby, the fulfillment of a wedding, a good match, a successful job, and so on. In other words, olive trees are thought to have power to resolve life’s disruptions such as infertility, joblessness, or the unmarried state, as well as to heal physical or mental illness. Pilgrimage to old olive trees in Village T in South Tunisia combines this power of the olive tree with saint veneration in a complex manner. Here, I will compare the results of my fieldwork in Village T with the

claim by Westermarck that tree worship has been practiced since the pre-Islamic Era and survives under the “disguise” of saint veneration, then provide more detail about the sacred trees.

### Pilgrimage to Olive Trees in Village T

*Ziyāra*, or visits to the graves of saints, are frequently practiced in North Africa. Similarly, olive farmers in South Tunisia undertake *ziyāra* to old olive trees, which are given particular names as saints, to celebrate harvest festivals and rites of passage and to make special petitions. Today, these *ziyāra* to olive trees are not often practiced in northern or central Tunisia, the centers of olive production. We can assume, however, that they were formerly a prevailing custom among Maghreb countries according to the ethnologies of Westermarck and Dermenghem <sup>16</sup>. In Tunisia, the practice continues, presumably as a remnant of a more widespread practice, in the Amazigh villages of the southern mountains where the Amazigh people were able to resist domination by the Arabs and the French due to the mountains and rocky desert that make up their homeland. Village T is one such Amazigh village where traditional life and customs are deliberately preserved in spite of the population outflow of the Amazigh people. The custom of *ziyāra* to olive trees has remained more prominent here than among the neighboring Amazigh villages. The olive trees that are thus visited are complexly described in conjunction with ambiguous and obscure references to saints, jinn, or ancestors. In this section, the practice of pilgrimage to

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15 Ibid.

16 Dermenghem, 2011, p. 136

old olive trees and the beliefs of the participants in Village T are described in detail, examined in relation to external conditions, practice, and folklore, and classified into extant symbolical categories.

### ***Environment of the Village***

Village T is located about 45 km southwest of Gabes. It is one of the few communities where Amazigh language is still spoken, although Arabic has replaced it in much of the surrounding regions. The village is surrounded by rocky desert (*reg*) with mountains and wadis; the climate is hot semi-arid. Its annual rainfall is around 200mm<sup>17</sup>, falling mainly in winter from October to February. In summer, rainfall is rare. Olives and some figs and dates are cultivated by the traditional agricultural technique for arid land called *Jessour*, in which rainwater is stored behind an embankment<sup>18</sup>. Residents also cultivate grains such as wheat, barley, lentils, and fava beans, but the resulting produce is not sufficient to feed the population. Accordingly, staple foods such as bread or couscous are bought from the northern part of the country. Because the land suitable for agriculture is very limited, the pasturage of goats and sheep is also popular in the desert. People who live in the center of the village often go to the rural desert to feed their flocks. For educational purposes, children generally stay in the village, but adult family members

sometimes stay outside to engage in olive farming and pasturage.

The total population of Village T and the neighboring villages was 913 according to the first result of the 2014 census of the municipality. The number of people who actually live in the village, however, is thought to be about half of that. A comparison with the data from 2004 reveals a population decrease of about 37% on average. In particular, the 45% decrease in male inhabitants is more remarkable than the 28% decrease in female inhabitants. This reflects heavy population losses due to emigration of the male population to larger cities and abroad. Large numbers of men from the villages work in cities such as Tunis and Sfax or in France, though most of them return to their homelands during summer vacation to reunite with their families and community. This is one of the main reasons many annual pilgrimages, along with weddings, festivals, *tohol* (ceremony of circumcision), and other events are held in summer. People choose the day for their visit to a sacred site based on when family members living outside the village can be there.

There are seven original Amazigh clans (*wlad*) and 19 other Amazigh clans who came to this village later. There are also four non-Amazigh clans called Arab (*a'arouche*) clans who immigrated to this village in relatively recent years, mainly from Dhība near Libya. It is difficult to distinguish among the lifestyles and customs of these three categories of families. One woman in her sixties who immigrated to this village with her family from Yemen when she was very young recalled that she had to learn not only the Amazigh language in order to communicate with the other inhabitants, but also their customs such as weaving,

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<http://www.weatherbase.com/weather/weather.php?cityname=Matmata%2C+Qabis%2C+Tunisia>

18 Mechlia et.al., 2009, p.22-223

dress, marriage ceremonies, and local saint veneration practices. This was necessary, she said, because of the conservative and close-knit character of the village, which is preserved in order to protect the Amazigh culture and language from outside influence. Although there are implicit rules to exclude foreign culture by forbidding marriage between male Amazigh and female Arabs, the immigrants have been, as a whole, deeply integrated into the traditional Amazigh customs, although the coexistence of Amazigh and Arabs does cause them some anxiety.

### **Features of the Olive-Saint Complexes in Village T**

I have undertaken eight periods of fieldwork between August 2014 and August 2017, consisting of both observation and interviews with over 50 individual villagers as well as 20 families. My informants were males and females ranging in age from their 20s to their 90s and including both Amazigh and Arab families of origin. My survey revealed the names of 26 sacred places related to olive trees, of which 20 were pilgrimage sites (Table 1).

**Table 1:** Population of Village T and neighboring villages

	<b>2004</b>	<b>2014</b>
Total population	1442	913
Number of population, Male	714	390
Number of population, Female	728	523
Number of households	382	257
Number of dwellings	691	501

The list of these places includes all sites where saints are linked to olive trees as reported by the informants. If a sacred place was located in a neighboring village, I included it on the list only if it had been visited by villagers from Village T. The natures of venerated objects at these sites are not only human Muslim saints such as *hajj*, but also ancestors, spirits, and olive trees. These are often combined in one sacred place, and the interpretation of what is being venerated at a particular site can vary from informant to informant. Thus, I will call these venerated objects olive-saint complexes, as it is difficult to make a clear distinction among them. Each olive -saint complex seems to function as a sacred being with a complexly expressed image, because the sacred is experienced not

analytically but rather as a whole. The sites of these olive-saint complexes are not always connected with a mausoleum (*zāwiya*) containing the coffin of a saint; in fact, most of them don't have it. There is no generic name for olive-saint complexes or their sanctuaries; instead, they are simply called by their individual names such as Camoul Brel or Onm Chemlali. Yet, there does seem to be a certain category like olive-saint complex as understood by the villagers because the names given in response to my question of "what are the names of some saints related to olive trees" were frequently repeated by many different respondents. Those that appear early in the list below (Table 2) are those mentioned most frequently. The names of the olive-saint complexes and the places where they are venerated are

Table 2: Olive-saint complex sanctuaries visited by residents of Village T

name of place and type	name of saint (nature)	the khadem (caretaker)	object to be visited	condition of domiciles	hadīya (offerings)
Camoul Brel (3)	Camoul Brel (olive tree, Jinnīya)	ex-R (f, dead) → M (m, 50s)	olive tree, nearby small shrine (kobba), troglodytic house	troglodytic	red or green scarf or hizem (bellyband), olive oil, bsisa, bukhōr, animal sacrifice (sheep)
Onm Chemlali (3)	Onm Chemlali (Jinnīya)	ex-M (m, dead) → ex-T (m, dead) → S (m, 70s)	olive tree, nearby small shrine (kobba)	troglodytic	white hizem, scarf, musk, candle, bsisa, animal sacrifice
Onm Zīn (2)	Onm Zīn (ancestor, olive tree, Jinnīya)	A (m), Lineage (descendant)	F troglodytic house	troglodytic	red or green scarf, bsisa, bukhōr, animal sacrifice
Chaabet Aīsa (1)	Hajji Ali Bel Mousa (ancestor)	ex-M's mother (f, dead) → M (m, descendant, 90s)	grave of Hajji Ali, nearby small shrine (kobba), olive tree	troglodytic	red or green scarf, bsisa, bukhōr, animal sacrifice
El Mamoura (3)	Mimouna (olive tree, Jinnīya )	ex-Z (f, dead) → A (f, 90s)	olive tree	—	cloth with olive oil
Hajji Youcef (1)	Sidi Youcef (ancestor)	ex-A (m, dead, descendant)	troglodytic house	troglodytic	candle, bsisa, bukhōr, kebda(liver), animal sacrifice
Onm Zaitouna (3)	Onm Zaitouna/Chemlali Mkari El Fougīra (olive tree, Jinnīya)	Ex-B's mother-in-law → B (f, 90s)	olive tree	troglodytic	bsisa, bukhōr, kebda, animal sacrifice
Zaitoun Mahjoub (1)(3)	Sidi Mahjoub (male saint in Douz)	A (m, deputy)	olive tree	none present	bsisa, bukhōr, animal sacrifice
Onml Māsla (3)	(female, ancient mill)	S (m, 50s), Z (f, 70s)	remains of ancient mill in cave	troglodytic	bsisa, bukhōr, mulukhiyah, chicken sacrifice
Onm Ilgār (1)	Onm Ilgār (ancestor)	A (m)	troglodytic house, separated olive tree	troglodytic	candle, bsisa, bukhōr, animal, hizem, money
Bent Chemlali (3)	(olive tree, Jinnīya)	ex-M (f, dead) → A (m)	olive tree, nearby small shrine (kobba)	—	candle, bsisa, bukhōr, animal sacrifice
Zaitoun Jahfa (3)	(olive tree)	M (m, 70s)	olive tree	troglodytic	bsisa, bukhōr, animal sacrifice
Fugīra Selma (2)	Fugīra Selma (Jinnīya)	Lineage A	a grave, olive tree	troglodytic	bsisa, bukhōr
Azīza (3)	Onm Aziza (Jinnīya)	S (m, 30s)	troglodytic house, nearby small shrine (troglodytic), olive tree	troglodytic	bsisa, bukhōr, kebda, animal sacrifice

Table 2 Continue

Onm Zouwīya (3)	Onm Zouwīya (Jinnīya)	M (m, 50s)	small shrine (kobba) on a hill, olive tree	troglodytic	cooking
Onm Zierzi (3)	Onm Zierzi (ancestor)	Z (f, 70s, deputy)	olive tree	troglodytic	bsisa, bukhōr
Dra'a Sliman (1)	Sidi Sliman (Male saint in Beni Aisa)	A (m)	grave of Sidi Sliman, olive tree	troglodytic	bsisa, bukhōr, animal sacrifice
Onm Rabbes (3)	Onm Rabbes (Jinnīya)	K (f, 70s)	olive tree, separate small shrine (troglodytic)	troglodytic	henna, bukhōr, animal sacrifice, stalk of wheat
Sidi Mbarak (1)	Sidi Mbarak Ben Wenda Adhībi (ancestor)	M (m, 70s descendant), A (m, 70s, descendant)	grave and zāwiya of Sidi Sliman, olive tree	near to the colony	henna, bsisa, bukhōr, animal sacrifice, fringe of scarf
Lalla Belboula (1)	Lalla Belboula (ancestor)	M (m)	grave of Lalla Belboula, shrine (troglodytic), nearby olive tree	near to the colony	candle, bukhōr, animal sacrifice
Onml Krīl	—	—	—	—	—
Onml Maana	—	—	—	—	—
Wlad Ghīn	—	—	—	—	—
Bel Houd	(Male saint)	—	—	—	—
Las Dishel	—	—	—	—	—
Mourarubīr u Zaitouna	—	—	—	—	—

listed separately because they are not always identical. The nature of the venerated object is also listed along with the name of the saint. In the case of El Mamoura, for example, El Mamoura is the name of the place, whereas the name of the saint is Mimouna, and its nature is both an olive tree and a *jinnīya* (female spirit).

In the village, a saint is called *walī* (male or female) or *fugīr* (male)/*fugīra* (female), and both male and female saints are venerated deeply. The female-to-

male ratio among olive-saint complexes is 3:1, whether human or spirit. This is easily seen from their names, many of which begin with the respectful prefix “*onm*,” which literally means “mother” and is also used for “auntie.” According to one informant (M, male, 40s), *walī* refers to a Muslim saint, whereas *fugīr* (*fugīra*) refers to a *jinn* or *jinnīya*. Most olive-saint complexes, however, are called *walī* even if they are connected with *jinnīya*, however.

Although the years of their deaths are rarely known, we can categorize the saints into three possible groups: (1) existent ancestors, i.e., human beings known from legends and anecdotes, (2) obscure ancestors that cannot be linked to known individuals, and (3) spirits of olive trees or olive trees themselves. For example, in the case of Chaabet Aīsa, the saint called Hajji Ali is said to be a paternal ancestor of the present *khadem* (caretaker) M (male, 90s). He was the first person from the area to accomplish the pilgrimage to Mecca, as shown by his name *Hajji*. He originally came from Village Z, which is near Village T. He had two sons and favored one of them, who was named Aīsa, whom he granted his land and the olive, and the descendants of Aīsa have maintained the land and the olive tree. Even though there is no written evidence for this story, it is enough to place Hajji Ali in the first category. Site number 6, Hajji Youcef, can also be placed in the same group. On the contrary, Onm Zīn does not have a clear figure as a human ancestor in the form of anecdotes, although the site's clan F caretaker is said to be her descendant. This site has an olive tree and a room used as a shrine in a troglodytic house (*camoul*). Pilgrims visit both the tree and the shrine in honor of Onm Zīn. She is said to have been a female saint who lived in this *camoul* long ago, and the olive tree is also regarded as having belonged to her. While her human story is barely sketched out, there are many stories of *jinniya* in this place. It is therefore likely that the figure of Onm Zīn as a human ancestor was attached to a being understood to be a spirit, and the site is accordingly placed in the second category.

Whereas in categories (1) and (2), the presence of olive trees at the sites is explained derivatively as having been owned by a saint or used by a saint for

meditation, sites in category (3) such as Camoul Brel or Onm Chemlali depict olive trees directly as spirits or saints. At such a sanctuary, a small shrine made of stones with a round roof (*qobba*) is typically set in front of a tree. This shrine is dedicated to the tree or its spirit. There are many stories of *jinniya* associated with such places, and the custom of tying rags to these olive trees is quite popular.

Sanctuaries and mausoleums (*zāwiya*) of saints as well as olive-saint complexes are generally under the management of caretakers called *khadem* or *wakīl*. *Khadem* literally means representative, agent, or trustee. The role of the *khadem* is typically passed down through a descendant clan, and both males and females can assume the post. The male-to-female ratio among the present and known past *khadem* of olive-saint complexes is 2:1. Their duties are to maintain the sacred place, perform *ziyāra*, distribute offerings to the poor, and sometimes manage gatherings in honor of the saint (*hadra*) or festivals (*zelda*). Because this is not a rigid system, unlike registration of land ownership, it is possible that a saint may have two or three *khadems* or no *khadem*. Even when villagers disagree about who is the present *khadem* of an olive tree-saint complex, at least they have consensus about the clan of the *khadem*. This is likely because each olive-saint complex belongs to a particular clan in Village T which has lived as a family unit and passed down the role of *khadem* from parent to child. The villagers know who the *khadem* of an olive-saint complex is because they know whose clan owns which land. During my fieldwork, I observed one case in which two persons claimed to be *khadem* of an olive-saint complex; they occasionally met each other

during *ziyāra*, acknowledged one another as *khadem*, and shared offerings dedicated to the saint.

The successor to a *khadem* is appointed by that *khadem*. There are no strict rules such as primogeniture governing the inheritance of the role. Onm Zaitouna, which literally means Mother Olive Tree, is regarded as a very powerful saint and important for belief in the power of old olive trees. B (female, 90s) was appointed as its *khadem* by the previous *khadem* who was her mother-in-law. She chose B from among her family because of B's sense of closeness to the tree, but also consulted an imām of the mosque in the village. The imam asked other villagers whether B would be a suitable *khadem* for Onm Zaitouna. After three weeks, the choice was confirmed and B was permitted to succeed to this position. The *khadem* of this tree has also been called Onm Zaitouna, and is sometimes thought to share the spiritual power possessed by the tree.

The *khadem* is the only person who can harvest the fruits of trees revered as olive-saint complexes; anyone else who attempts to have the fruits will be punished by the saint. The tree's olive oil, however, is not the property of its *khadem* but is customarily given back to the tree as an offering or to the poor as *zakāt* (the Islamic duty of charity). The purpose of becoming a *khadem* is not to earn offerings or olive fruits, but rather, to serve the olive-saint complex and the people. Even if the *khadem* uses the olive oil for his/her own family, people believe it is possible because the *khadem* is permitted to do so by the saint. If the saint dislikes any act of the *khadem*, it is believed that the *khadem* will be punished by the saint. Hajji Ali is said to have appeared to the wife of the *khadem* in a dream, expressed anger

at the absence of her husband, and made their daughters have a fatal accident. In another example, a former *khadem* of Onm Chemlali was apparently killed because he wed a woman other than Onm Chemlali. The role of *khadem* in this village is not regulated by an explicit system, but rather, supported by specific, implicit, and spiritual relations between *khadem* and saint.

If we look at the geographical distribution of the olive-saint complexes around village T, it is obvious that many of them are located in places distant from the village center (Figure 1). Given that many small mausoleums of normal saints are found in the village center, the location of the olive-saint complexes on the periphery is remarkable. The main reason for this seems to be that the mountains, valleys, and wadis on the periphery have historically been more important for olive cultivation and pasturage than the village center. In the center of Village T, there are a grand mosque, an elementary school, a post office, a clinic, and grocery stores. While this site has thus been a focus of trade and governance, the limited space within the mountaintop village is not large enough for agriculture and pasturage, and it is also difficult to collect enough water to support the city's population. Therefore, many families have lived in the rocky desert out of the center, where they have built dams (*jessour*) in the valleys to store water for the cultivation of olive trees and other plants and troglodytic houses to live in. Such locations between hills also makes it easier to get water for people and animals. This is why most olive -saint complexes have troglodytic houses as seen in Table 2: because the sanctuaries are located in the inherited lands of clans which have been used as residential areas and olive farms. In other



**Figure 1:** Location of central village and sanctuaries



**Figure 2:** Onm Chemlali and its shrine

words, the sacred olive trees are found at the dwellings of small clan-based communities.

The people typically regard life in the desert as more authentic and virtuous than life in the central village. Legends of some saints praise their simple lives spent in the company of animals or olive trees, apart from society; the village mayor, for example, commented that people find the best saints outside the village center. People like to stay in the center for schooling or during the agricultural off-season, but the idea of settling permanently away from their olive trees often engenders feelings of guilt and heightened awareness that their original home is their clan land. By performing *ziyāra* to the olive-saint complexes on their clan land as an annual event or for rites of passage, they return to their ancestral land and olive trees as the center of their community.

### Ritual Practice

At sanctuaries dedicated to human or semi-human saints categorized in (1) or (2) as described in the above section, pilgrims mainly visit the facilities related to the saint, such as a grave, mausoleum or residence, and visit the olive tree additionally. In the case of Chaabet Aīsa where Hajji Ali is enshrined, pilgrims visit his grave and his descendants' graves near his small shrine. Within a distance of about 20 meters, there is an olive tree called Zaitounat Chaabet Aīsa (olive tree of Chaabet Aīsa), where pilgrims cook food and stay. Offerings (*hadīya*) such as *bsisa* and *bukhōr* are given to the grave, the shrine, and the tree by the mistress of the family or a female petitioner for special requests. To offer the *bsisa*, which is made of barley

flour, sugar, and powdered spices, she mixes it with olive oil and sprinkles it with the fingers of her right hand. This action is called *tatīsh* in this area and *nnattro* in Beni Khedache. *Bukhōr* is the smoke of incense, which is made by putting solid incense such as *ruben* (frankincense) or *jawee* (benzoin) into burning charcoal in a small pot. These offerings are prepared under the olive tree and offered to the tree as well as to the path to the grave, and finally placed in the shrine. Any animal sacrifice is performed near the shrine and the animal's gallbladder is placed in the crotch of the olive tree just after its dissection. Pilgrims also keep the liver (*kebda*) for direct sacrifice. The liver is cooked with salt, torn into pieces and offered by *tatīsh* to the tree, the pathway, and the grave and shrine. *Bsisa* and *kebda* are distributed to all pilgrims present and are ideally eaten right away. Participants believe that they will be given the *baraka* of the saint by eating the same foods along with the saint while chanting "*Inshalla Ziyāra Makboura* (May God accept the pilgrimage)."

At category (3) sites such as Camoul Brel or Onm Chemlali, on the other hand, where only a sacred olive tree and its shrine are present, the importance of making offerings to the olive tree is clearer. Whereas the shrine of Hajji Ali faces his grave, the shrines of Camoul Brel and Onm Chemlali both face the olive trees (1). Some tools such as pots and pans for *bukhōr* are kept in the shrine. During a pilgrimage, the mistress of a family or a female petitioner prepares *bsisa* and *bukhōr*. She goes around the tree in a clockwise direction, performing *tatīsh* of *bsisa* to the tree from all sides, to the shrine, and to the troglodyte house, then gives the remaining *bsisa* to the others to eat. *Bukhōr* is likewise offered to the tree from all sides, then placed in the shrine.

Generally speaking, the *bsisa* and *bukhōr* can be offered in reverse order to olive-saint complexes as well as normal saints. It is required, however, to offer these gifts immediately upon arrival at any sanctuary with strong spiritual power, which is described as a “hot place” (*bou ashoun*; usually understood as a place that is haunted by spirits). Offering *bsisa* and *bukhōr* is a gift to the saint or jinn that is given to soothe and please them and thereby receive their permission to enter the sanctuary. At less powerful sites, however, the requirement of an immediate offering is less strict. During a pilgrimage to Onm Zierzi, for example, a pilgrim (Z, female, 70s) performed the offering of *bsisa* and *bukhōr* just before leaving. She explained that “if we make *ziyāra* to a very ‘hot place,’ we have to offer *bsisa* and *bukhōr* soon after arrival, otherwise it will be very dangerous for us. But to the normal place like Onm Zierzi, it can be the last.”

As Camoul Brel is considered to have strong power to bring down danger, people avoid entering the sanctuary and even passing near this place on the road if they are not performing a *ziyāra*. For pilgrimages to Camoul Brel, the sacrifice of a goat or sheep is an obligation, whereas in other places this is not always the case. The animal slaughter (*dhubīhah*) is performed by a male pilgrim who must recite the name of God as when animals are slaughtered outside the context of pilgrimage. The animal is held facing Mecca, and set between the tree and the shrine so that it may be offered to both sites. Its *kebda* (liver) is also cooked separately with salt, and offered to the tree from all sides in a clockwise direction and to its shrine by *tatīsh*, then shared with other pilgrims in a manner similar to that seen at Chaabet Aīsa. Along with the remaining meat, pilgrims then prepare couscous and/or other foods to eat

there. The leftover couscous is brought back to the house and shared with other relatives, as it is regarded as being full of *baraka*. Anyone can do the cooking, but the *tatīsh* of the *bsisa* and *kebda* and the offering of the *bukhōr* should be done by a woman, typically by the mistress of the family or a female petitioner who comes to ask the saint for a special wish. If the petitioner is man, his mother or wife must perform these duties.

There are two types of *ziyāra* with two different purposes: communal pilgrimages that are performed at certain times of year, and individual pilgrimages for rites of passage or personal problems. In communal pilgrimages, ideally, all members of the family go to the local olive-saint complex related to their clan; in summer, they go to wish for a good harvest, and in spring, they go to give thanks for the harvest. Some families visit their olive-saint complex after Īd al-Kbīr (Īd al-Adha) or at the celebration of the new year (Ehtifel) in their local calendar as *sena al-ajamīya*,<sup>19</sup> or after Āshūrā (the 10th day of the first month in the Islamic calendar). On such an occasion, many members living outside the village come back to attend this *ziyāra* with family. It has a strong connotation of returning to one’s ancestral land as mentioned above.

Individual pilgrimages, such as those made to wish for a personal request, on the other hand, are normally performed only by the petitioner and his/her close family members. These requests may include the

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<sup>19</sup> It literally means the calendar of non-Arabs, which originated as the Julian calendar introduced in the Period of the Roman Empire.

Doutte, 1984, p. 541

fulfillment of a wedding, a good marital match, the birth of a baby, academic success, job success, finding a lost object, spell and dispel of magic. Among these, the most popular requests made to the olive-saint complexes in category (3) are for marriage and babies. At Camoul Brel, women tie their *hizēm* (traditional woolen belt for women) or scarf to the branch of the olive tree to make their wish. This knot (*okād*) should not be untied until their wish is fulfilled. The branch on which it is tied should have no other knots. The colors of these votive clothes are chosen according to the nature of the request. If the wish is for a wedding, the cloth should be red, which is the color of a bride's veil, and if it is for a baby, the cloth should be a white *hizēm*, which is worn by married women and used as a belly band, or a similar white cloth. The pilgrim C (female, 30s) and her mother S (female, 60s) mentioned that only women can perform this ritual of tying cloth to olive trees and that olive saints only do favors for women. If a man has a request, his mother or wife will make the request to the tree. As there is a special spiritual relation between an olive-saint complex and its *khadem*, women are likewise believed to have strong connections with such olive trees.

Although tied scarves or *hizēm* are seen at many olive-saint complex sites, other objects such as the fringe of a scarf, a flag, or a cap are also sometimes used (Camoul Brel, Onm Zīn). Furthermore, olive oil in a bottle (Onm Ilgār), a fire in which an olive oil-soaked cloth is burned (El Mamoura), or a stalk of wheat (Onm Rabbēs) can also be a votive offering. It is worth noting that the petitioner typically promises (*wa'ada*) the saint that she will do something if her request is fulfilled. F (female, 30s), a pilgrim to Sidi Mbarak, promised that "If God gives me children, I will come back to open this knot

and make a *wa'ada*," i.e., to come back to visit the saint and to prepare food and distribute it to others. Tying such knots has been regarded as black magic and criticized by official Islam as mentioned in the Quran (113.4). Nevertheless, offerings of one's own clothes or a part of body at sacred sites are made worldwide. They are interpreted as symbolic actions for the purposes of communication with the sacred based on religious sensitivity and eagerness to be with or near the sacred<sup>20</sup>.

Because the fruits of the sacred olive trees belong to the olive-saint complex, carrying them out or pressing them is forbidden to all except the *khadem*, although they can be eaten at the sanctuary. There are many folktales prohibiting attempts to possess these olives; in one of these, thieves who take the olive fruits of a saint and pile them on a wagon are crushed by falling stones (S, male, 70s); in another, when someone tries to press olive fruits taken from a sanctuary, the mill (*māsla*) is broken (H, male, 70s). Even the olives harvested by the *khadem* should also be mostly given back to the tree after pressing. More than half of the oil from Zaitounat Chaabet Aīsa should be offered to the tree on the day of pressing during a celebration with music in hopes of a good harvest. In the case of Zaitoun Mahjoub, 20 liters of oil should be kept in a tank inside the tree, and the people who visit this site mix this oil with their *bsīsa* and offer it to the tree. The rest is kept in the mausoleum of Sidi Mahjoub in bottles which poor pilgrims can take home. People believe that the olive oil from sacred olive trees is not the property of any one person, although in general the purpose of every olive

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20 Eliade, 1959, pp. 42-43

tree is to produce fruits for harvest. The special treatment of this olive oil functions as a sacrifice of agricultural products along the same lines as the animal sacrifices that are made during pilgrimages.

On pilgrimages to olive-saint complexes, sacrifice and eating together assume critically important roles because these rituals are based on the religious sense that the energy of the world comes from outside as spirits or ancestors bring fertility. People return the results of mundane activity toward the sacred world in the form of offerings or sacrifices, and in this way, the world is purified and renewed. Communal feast (eating *bsisa* or couscous) is necessary for the same reason. Through eating together with the sacred being, man can be renewed (i.e., can receive *baraka*), and the practice reminds us of the meaning of food as something that we do not create by ourselves but rather, that is created and given to us. The food is sanctified by being offered to the sacred reality, then given to the people and shared. Eating together with all participants or attendees at a pilgrimage symbolizes the inclusion of all human beings in the feast.

### Folklore Concerning Olive-Saint Complexes

On occasions of *ziyāra* to olive-saint complexes, people often tell and retell mysterious stories of the saints and spirits. These are not only legends from long ago but also current folktales experienced by themselves. The saints and spirits may appear to the villagers in dreams or during wakefulness in different forms. The experience of such a manifestation of a supernatural existence is at the center of all religious phenomena; Rudolf Otto calls them “*das Numinöse*” in

his study about the sacred. He criticized the rational and ethical idea of the term “the sacred (*das Heilige*)” as it is generally used, calling it just a secondary meaning. In contrast, he defined “*das Numinöse*” as religious feelings experienced irrationally and directly, and claimed that these represent the original meaning of “the sacred.” His coinage “Numinöse” is composed of the noun “Numen,” which means divinity or divine presence in Latin. It means “a unique numinous category of value and of a definitely numinous state of mind, which is always found wherever the category is applied.” Thus, it is a feeling that arises inside the subject who perceives the object which is a divine presence. The primal element of the experience of Numinöse, Otto argued, is objectiveness; to sense an existence outside of the self, and the deepest and most fundamental element of such religious emotion is “awe,” also called “mysterium tremendum.”<sup>21</sup>

Among the several types of miraculous stories of olive-saint complexes, manifestations as women are reported in the largest number. The main reason for such manifestations is as punishment for the violation of the sanctuary by provoking an “awe-ful” experience. By inquiring how these olive-saint complexes appear to people and how they are experienced, we can uncover the meaning of these folktales of religious experience. They are divided into seven types according to the appearance of the manifestation, each of which will be discussed separately below.

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21 Otto, 1936, p.7 *sqq.*

### **Manifestations as Women**

Most of the olive-saint complexes around Village T are seen in the forms of women, suddenly and in the daytime as an interruption into this world.

After making a *ziyāra*, a man picked olive fruits from Camoul Brel and stuffed his pockets. When he was about to leave the place, something was thrown toward him from behind. With suspicion, he turned and saw a beautiful woman. Surprised, he slipped and all of the fruits fell out of his pockets. He shut himself in his house and did not talk for six months. (B, female, 90s)

The family of the mother of H had offered 1 kg meat to the olive tree of Onm Zīn every year. One day during their *ziyāra*, a woman appeared near the tree and said "One kilogram of meat is not enough, offer one sheep!" The mother of H claimed that she did not have a sheep. Then the woman said, "Look around." She looked around as the woman had said, and found a sheep under the tree. The family then sacrificed the sheep to the *jinnīya* of the tree. (H, male, 70s)

T, an ex-*khadem*, and M, the *khadem* prior to T, saw Onm Chemlali. She was a beautiful woman in a red dress and was walking around her olive tree. (S, male, 80s)

When a sister-in law of A was drawing water at El Mamoura, Mimouna appeared and said "Don't draw this water and don't take the figs." She was frightened and ran home. A's father admonished her, saying, "That is why I said not to go to El Mamoura!" (A, female, 90s)

The brother and father of A saw a woman in a white dress at Onm Zouwiya. When they approached, however, nobody was there. It happened because the

place has been very "hot" (*bouk ashouna*). (A, male, 50s)

Onm Ilgār had not been known as a powerful saint. Once, a woman appeared in the dream of an old woman and told her to come to the sanctuary with her family. She brought her family to the sanctuary, but the others with her did not believe in the power of Onm Ilgār. They stayed one night, during which everyone present had the same dream of Onm Ilgār. Then they knew that she was a very powerful saint. (S, female, 30s)

The sanctuary of Azīza is too powerful to pass in the night. Onm Azīza wears a white dress like that of a bride on "the day of palanquin." When some persons took fig fruits from this place and tried to bring them home, a woman with a white cloth appeared and stopped them. We can eat any fruits from this place while we are here, but we cannot bring them out. (M, male, 70s)

Onm Rabbēs and her many daughters are believed to stay at a cave and an olive tree. The *khadem* H smells the scent of *jaawee* incense and hears the sounds of a marriage ceremony every Friday. She is aware of the presence of Onm Rabbēs by these signs. Sometimes, she sees lights and also Onm Rabbēs herself, who looks neither young nor old. (H, female, 70s)

Except for Onm Ilgār, these manifested women are considered *jinnīya* (female spirits). The frequency of manifestations of women near olive trees shows that olive-saint complexes are expressed as feminine. Olive trees are also spoken of metaphorically as being female. The beauty of olive trees is often compared with the beauty of women in their local songs i.e., black olive

fruits for women's black eyes, and broad base of olive trees for big hips of women. Many are given female names with the prefix of Onm. When people visit the olive trees, pay their respects, and consult the olive tree-saint complexes about their problems, it is almost like they are returning to their ancestral homelands, greeting and honoring their mothers and aunties, and asking them for advice. Additionally, the olive tree-saint complexes frequently appear as women in the context of a wedding, which is the most important rite of passage for women. Pilgrims, the majority of whom are women, report feeling the presence and female power of olive trees or *jinnīya*. One informant said that a petitioner should write her own name along with those of her mother and maternal grandmother onto the offered cloth to show her maternal family origins. This evidence leads us to suppose that the veneration of these trees and their specifically feminine olive-saint complexes has been passed down in the mythical world of women from mother to daughter, because it complements the religiosity of women, which is subsidiary to that of men in mainstream Islam.

### **Marriage with *Jinnīya***

In keeping with the femininity of the olive trees, there are also folktales of marriage with the female spirits of olive trees. This is not reported to have happened at many olive-saint complexes in Village T, but stories of men being married or nearly married to female spirits are told. This type of folklore is also reported in neighboring villages.

T, a *khadem* of Onm Chemlali, was doing agricultural work at the sanctuary. While he took a nap

for rest, all of his farmwork was finished, and his lunch was prepared although no one was there to cook it. He always won fights, even against many other men, and could catch fire with his bare hands. He had these powers because he was married to a *jinnīya*. His spiritual wife could not be seen by anyone but himself. She disliked the idea of him having another wife, whether human or *jinnīya*, and warned him that if he married another woman, he would die. As she said, he and his new wife died just after their wedding. (M, male, 90s)

A, a *khadem* of Onm Zīn, sometimes found that his lunch had been prepared while he was working to care for the olive tree. His co-workers wondered about this and asked whether he brought his wife to do it, but he never replied. Many people knew that he was in contact with the *jinnīya* of this tree. (H, male, 50s)

Another man working to care for the olive trees at Onm Zīn found a lunch and a beautiful woman in a white dress. She asked him whether he was married. He was very terrified and ran home. (H, male, 70s)

The clan of A has hereditarily taken care of the tree of Jīmnya and is said to have a relationship with the *jinnīya* of this tree. The current *khadem* has never married, and people say that he is married to a spiritual wife. Sometimes, people find that his lunch has been prepared though no one is near. (Refers to an olive - saint complex near Village T, M, male, 80s).

Such stories of marriage with *jinnīya* fit into a pattern of folklore that is known not only in North Africa but in the Middle East as well, though it is not limited to the spirits of olive trees. As in many other stories conforming to this pattern of mythological heterogamy that are told throughout the world, spirit marriage is the

explanation for a male's special fortune or power<sup>22</sup>. In Village T, several stories are told about men, usually *khadem*, working to care for a sanctuary who are given rewards for their work by female spirits. Stories of the seduction of men by *jinnīya*, who are famous for their beauty and high libido, may be related to Moroccan legends of Aisha Qandisha, who is a degraded form of Astarte, a fertility goddess of Phoenicia<sup>23</sup>. Although their lust makes *jinnīya* powerfully sexually attractive and rich in fertility, it also makes them highly likely to bring catastrophe on the physical world (nomos). This is shown in the story about Onm Chemlali, in which disaster befell a man who had got married to the *jinnīya*. A relationship with a *jinnīya* can bring not only blessings but also curses and danger due to her excessive passion expressed as irrationality or strong envy that is uncontrollable by humans.

### **Manifestations as Men**

There are exceptions to humans' inability to control spirits, namely, the saints, especially male saints. The olive trees at male saints' sanctuaries as well as the trees' spirits are typically said to have been owned by the saints during their lifetimes, but stories of manifestations of male saints are very rare. In practice, folklore makes no distinction between male human saints and male spirits.

22 Westermarck, op.cit., i. p. 266, Mardrus 2004, Tales of second sheikh

23 Westermarck, 1933, p. 21

Near the grave of Hajji Ali, an old man was seen. People thought that he was the *jinn* of this place. (H, male, 30s)

During pilgrimages to Sidi Mbarak, people sleep next to his coffin wearing white clothes in hopes of seeing the saint in a dream. Sidi Mbarak does sometimes appear in dreams as a beautiful old man who speaks to the dreamers. (A, male, 70s)

Hajji Ali appeared in the dream of A, wife of the *khadem*. He asked her where his *khadem* was, but she couldn't answer. Then he stabbed her stomach with an arm-sized syringe. Being afraid of this dream, she asked her husband to sacrifice a sheep to the saint but he did not do it. This caused their two daughters to be involved in a fatal car accident in which one of them was killed. (A, female, 90s).

In contrast to the fact that most saints venerated in Maghreb countries these days are male, the number of male olive-saint complexes at Village T is very small, being only one-third the number of females. Furthermore, all the male saints are said to be human saints who existed in history, as hajji or as persons buried at the sanctuary. The olive trees at these sites as well as the trees' spirits are said to have belonged to human saints during their lifetimes. Visiting local deities or ancestors to pray for a good harvest or to see one's fortune in a dream seems to have been generally performed since the Hellenic era in Maghreb countries.<sup>24</sup> Rituals of this type, which includes fertility rituals for both agriculture and human pregnancy, serve as the basis for saint veneration in North Africa. Although male saints may appear to differ from the

24 Brett et al., 2007, pp.34-35

female spirits of olive trees in some details, we can say that both are connected with spirits of nature.

### ***Appearance and Influence of Animals***

Among the folktales related to animals at the sanctuaries of olive-saint complexes, there are two types: those involving the transformation of spirits into animals and those involving sensitive mysterious actions of animals. Many people believe that animals have superior ability to perceive the supernatural and that they can convey the presence or communicate the desires of saints or spirits to humans indirectly.

Some people from Village Z tried to cut branches from the olive tree of Hajji Ali to bring them home, but the donkey harnessed to their wagon was not able to move with the branches on the wagon. (M, male, 90s)

If a female petitioner sees a white horse during a *ziyāra* to Hajji Ali to wish for a baby, soon she will be pregnant. Hajji Ali also keeps many snakes in his sanctuary, and when A tried to drink abortive medicine, a snake got entangled around her neck to stop her. This was seen by her husband M. (M, male, 90s and A, female, 90s)

H visited Camoul Brel with 60 people nine years previously. The women slept inside the troglodytic house while the men slept under the olive tree of Camoul Brel. In the morning, they saw many snakes around the tree, but the snakes never attacked the men. This was understood to be because of protection by the spirits and the *baraka* of the tree. (H, male, 30s)

Onm Chemlali loves animals such as rabbits and birds. One day the brother of the *khadem* S shot a

rabbit at the site. When he approached to take it, it revived and wiped its face, then ran. He shot it again, and the rabbit fell down, but got up again, and again wiped its face. He stopped hunting it and consulted with S, who told his brother that this was happening because of the strong power of the saint. (S, male, 70s)

Sometimes, Onm Chemlali appears as a cat or a rabbit. M's daughter always sees a rabbit at the sanctuary. If she catches it, however, it will disappear. This is because Onm Chemlali is not a human but a *jinnīya*. (M, female, 60s)

During the fight against French occupation, M stayed at the sanctuary of Fugīra Selma for two nights with a man from Douz to defend the village against the French army. The other man wanted to go home to see his wife. As he was leaving the place, however, a very long shadow appeared and barred his way. He and M then saw an impossibly tall woman who must have been a *jinnīya*. She became first a donkey then a dog. The man gave up and returned because he was afraid of Fugīra Selma. M thought that this occurred to prevent the man from telling secrets to the French army. (M, male, 90s)

These cases indicate the taboo of killing wild animals in sanctuaries and the closeness of the saints and spirits to animals. This closeness to animals is linked to saints' requests for animal sacrifices, as mentioned above. For pastoralists, livestock are naturally regarded more as property or capital rather than in the same manner as wild animals. While some olive-saint complexes prohibit the hunting of wild animals, other olive-saint complexes demand that people sacrifice livestock. Both these demands can be interpreted as warnings against the misunderstanding of

creatures as our property. Only when it is sacrificed can a sheep that was viewed as property be seen as an animal. By taking otherwise useful animals away from people through wildlife protection or livestock sacrifice, olive-saint complexes recover creatures and the world as significant in their own right.

### Blessings

When people explain why they perform *ziyāra* to olive-saint complexes, they speak of the *baraka* of the saints and the specific help they hope to get from them. To prove the power and virtuousness of the saints, specific instances of grace and blessing are described in stories.

B's granddaughter stayed eight nights at Onm Zaitouna to wish for a good job. As a result, she now holds a high position in France. (B, female, 90s)

Even in years without rain, there is rain in the sanctuary of Zaitoun Mahjoub. Olive trees generally bear only in alternate years, but the olive tree of Zaitoun Mahjoub bears many fruits every year because the place is very powerful. (B, male, 50s)

A's son was not good at study, so he performed *ziyāra* and recited Quran for Sidi Mbarak. One month later, he achieved top marks in his exams. He knew the answers to all the questions as though a teacher were standing behind him to help. He went to university and got a job in France. Now, he lives in France with his French wife. (A, male, 70s)

Before Tunisian independence, men carried guns, but the French army had started to restrict this. One day, M came across a cavalry of 20 soldiers near Onm Chemlali. Being afraid that they would discover his

gun, he hid inside the tree of Onm Chemlali following his mother's advice. After a while, he went up to the hill and found nobody. Onm Chemlali had swept away the French army with her power. (S, male, 70s)

When sexual intercourse is not achieved properly on the first night of marriage, if it is because of a problem with the woman (i.e., *msafhal* meaning "closed"), the couple performs a *ziyāra* to Sidi Mbarak. If it is because of a problem with the man (i.e., *ma'argel* meaning erectile dysfunction), the husband and his mother visit Dra'a Sliman to solve this problem. *Ma'argel* is thought to happen due to someone's spell. They should stay one day and night and offer a sacrifice of a sheep or goat to the saint. The problem will then be resolved. (Z, female, 70s)

Healing or undoing a spell, as in the last example, is often performed at olive-saint complexes. Marriage and babies are the most popular requests associated with *ziyāra*. Although it seems that many people experience positive results of their visits for marriage and babies, they do not talk of their personal experiences as examples of the saints' *baraka* because these stories are too symbolically embedded in their lives as rites of passage. While marriage and babies are matters of great importance for individual petitioners, they are also important to the community and are thus greater than mere personal problems. This is why pilgrimages to olive-saint complexes for such requests functions as a rite of passage. Petitioners whose wishes were granted must return to the saint's sanctuaries on the ceremonies of their weddings and their children's births to offer thanksgiving.

### **Punishments and Nightmares**

The power of olive-saint complexes is expressed more frequently through tales of punishments such as nervousness, madness, and destruction than through tales of blessing or help. The people in Village T told stories of terrifying experiences more vividly because such 'awe-ful' experiences make them feel the existence of the saints more powerfully than tales of blessings do.

On his last visit to Onm Zouwīya, A said "There is nothing in Onm Zouwīya." Later, he found that the tire of his buggy was punctured. (A, male, 50s)

A man cut the branches of Onm Zaitouna and fed them to his sheep. The next day, the sheep was dead. (B, female, 90s)

About 150 years ago, some men cut the branches of the olive tree of Hajji Ali and tried to take them away in a wagon, but all of them suddenly seemed to be held with invisible handcuffs and fetters near the tree. The family of the *khadem* came and asked the saint to pardon them. They were then able to return home. (A, female, 90s)

Once, there was a shrine for Mimouna, but a man crushed it. He became mad and died. (A, female, 90s)

S picked figs at Azīza. He knew that he was not supposed to bring them home, but he did anyway. He saw a woman as he was leaving the site, and now he cannot walk because of what he did. (Z, female, 70s)

People gain a more powerful sense of the reality of the olive-saint complexes from stories of their awe-ful power than from stories of their merciful power. This is because the awe-ful power is beyond human anticipation, that is, beyond a secular understanding of

the world. The manifestation of the sacred could destroy man's plans and evocate his existence, and that is an essential quality of the sacred.

Among the ominous symptoms caused by a saint or spirit's anger, insomnia and nightmares are especially pervasive. These function as a warning before a harsher punishment is issued, providing a grace period for atonement. Through experiencing insomnia or nightmares, people can become aware of any blasphemy or violation of the saint's wishes that they may have done without intention and have a chance to apologize.

A few years ago, C made a pilgrimage to Camoul Brel with the family of her aunt. After eating lunch, the people saw a big pillar of flame at its *qobba* (shrine). But when they approached, it was not burning at all. This happened because the family had been thinking about things other than the saint and had said bad things about other people. The fire on the *qobba* occurred because Camoul Brel did not like their behavior. Since then, C has not been able to get this incident out of her mind and has suffered from insomnia, and when she does sleep, she has nightmares and wakes soon. Although she has a two-month-old baby, she visited Camoul Brel because she dreamed of Camoul Brel on the previous night. (C, female, 30s)

About 10 years ago, S and her husband A worked at a farm near Camoul Brel. One day they passed by the site without making any offerings. S began to suffer from insomnia and several family problems occurred. S and A then performed *ziyāra* and sacrifice for the tree. (S, female 60s)

B's husband cut the branches of Onm Zaitouna although B was the *khadem*. He couldn't sleep for four

nights. The next time she visited the tree, she noticed what he had done. She offered a goat, *bsīsa* and *bukhōr*, and the problem was resolved. (B, female, 90s)

H is a shepherd who often takes animals to the area near Onm Ilgār. About four years ago, he sometimes lost sheep and couldn't find them. One person told him that it was because he came to the sanctuary but never gave offerings. H also hunted rabbits there. Onm Ilgār did not like it and made it so he could not sleep well. Finally, he had a dream that he had to visit the place to offer. Then, he performed *ziyāra* and offer a sacrifice of a sheep. The problems were swept away. (H, male, 30s)

As shown above, dreams have been and remain an important channel for contact with local spirits or ancestors in the Maghreb region.<sup>25</sup> Today, people still sleep near the coffin or under the olive tree of a saint to see him/her in a different time, which is active participation in sacred time. In contrast, insomnia and nightmares are disquieting ruptures of secular time caused by the sacred.

The miracles of the olive-saint complexes are phantasmagorical, terrifying, irrational, and destructive. These characteristics are far removed from those of the ideal saint in Islam, who is modest and ethical. The distinction between these types of saints corresponds to Dermenghem's distinction between 'popular saints' and 'real saints'. The goal of a real saint is selflessness, while a popular saint's most important features are charisma and miracles. Popular saints are quick to become harsh, irascible, emotional, and jealous,

reminiscent of the forces of nature, whose laws are not easy to understand at first glance.<sup>26</sup> According to Dermenghem's classification, the olive-saint complexes at Village T are mostly categorized as popular saints. Yet, the features of olive-saint complexes and popular saints are difficult to understand as those of human beings. While real saints such as Sufi experience the sacred, popular saints are experienced by the people as the sacred. It is necessary for us to conclude from their expressions how people experience the olive-saint complexes.

The meanings of the saints' manifestations and the desires that they communicate must be interpreted by the people. They can include demands, anger, warnings, and sometimes blessings. Most of them, however, are simply 'mysterium tremendum', 'the deepest and most fundamental element in all strong and sincerely felt religious emotion', as defined by Otto.<sup>27</sup> Normally, people carry out their domestic, agricultural, or pastoral labors according to expectations and plans they have made based on the rules of their own world. When a phenomenon such as the manifestation of a saint makes them aware of the reality of the divine existence, their interpretations of the conventional world can shift (anomie), and the new meaning of the world is created based on the significance of this phenomenon. In short, it enables people to experience the destruction of human-made plans and to participate in the divine cosmos that is newly created.

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<sup>25</sup> Doutte, 1909, p.412, Basset, 1920, p. 61, Brett et al., loc. cit.,

Herodotus, iv-172

<sup>26</sup> Dermenghem, 2011, pp.14-15

<sup>27</sup> Otto, op. cit., p. 12

Graceful manifestations of the saints and spirits, on the other hand, are easily regarded as supportive of the existing world and as extensions of this world. Their impact is too gentle for them to serve as momentum to break down the reality of this world. In this context, this world can be considered rather as an 'imitation of the primordial time' (*illo temporo*), like those widely seen in the creation myths of archaic religions.<sup>28</sup> As reported in Morocco, the blessing of the harvest is regarded as a manifestation of destructive power against the human-scaled world in the form of an excess of *baraka* (*qazqua*) that gives farmers dangerous power in harvested grains or olive oil.<sup>29</sup> Even though their creation myth has been lost, the manifestations of the olive-saint complexes show that olives, which are cultivated and harvested for the profit of human beings, originated outside the world, and thus, the return of human profit as sacrifice should be performed as it was in mythical times.

#### **Symbolism of Olive-Related Saints**

We have already described the features, rituals, and folktales of olive-saint complexes. From these, it becomes possible to identify certain symbolical elements linked to the olive tree, such as the Muslim saint, the ancestor, the spirit, and the mother. Each factor has

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28 Eliade, op. cit., p.70

29 Westermarck reported that when the pile of grains or olive oil increases after harvest, the animal sacrifice should be performed otherwise the children of other family of the farmer will be dead, 1926, i. pp. 220-221

multiple influences on the olive -saint complex (Figure 3).



**Figure 3:** Symbol of olive tree with flowers

The first factor is the image of real saints who were prominent in the Maghreb area, perhaps because of missionary work teaching the local people about Islam, establishing a Quranic school, or exerting supernatural power (*karāma*) to bring rain or defeat enemies. This establishes a framework of saint veneration that is also popular in other areas and neighboring villages, where saints such as Sidi Yakhref, Sidi Abdelkader of Village Z, Shamseddine, and Sidi Ali Boumedien of Delegation B are venerated. They are known in these areas as pious saints representing Islam, and their shrines attract pilgrims from nearby villages. Among the olive-saint complexes at Village T, however, this factor is not influential except at Sidi Mbarak. According to legend, this saint is said to have been a descendant of the Prophet and to prefer the recitation of Quran as an offering. There is no anecdote about his missionary contributions to Islam, only a story of his origin. Additionally, his preference for the Quran, his supernatural power, and his simple life in the desert with

animals apart from people correspond with the image of the ideal Muslim. Especially his *karāma* of teleportation and telecommunication are told as proof of his outstanding *baraka* as a friend of God. He is not identified with his olive tree but it is set in his sanctuary complementally. Many pilgrims visit his coffin only, though some women with special petitions visit the olive tree also.

The second image, that of the ancestor, is seen vividly in the fact that many *khadems* claim to be descendants of the saints, and that most of the olive-saint complexes are located in the lands where particular clans have lived and where they regularly return on pilgrimage as a family unit. Each clan's olive-saint complex, who has been venerated for generations, is a guardian of their land, called by the name of ancestor. Through being visited by descendants, it serves as a family tie for the tribal community as well as the center of their colony. In practice, it is difficult to make a clear distinction between ancestors and spirits because, as in the case of Hajji Ali, the figure of an ancestor may come to be strongly influenced by the image of a spirit, developing characteristics like affiliation with snakes and the ability to create fire. The syncretism of ancestors and spirits is a general phenomenon in archaic religions such as Totemism or ancestor worship, which seems to be a distinctive feature of the ancient religion of North Africa. Brett et al. thought that the ancient 'Berber' tribes had considered the spirits as their ancestral deities according to the Greco-Roman descriptions of Herodotus and Pomponius Mela, mentioning that "the funerary elements are mixed with fairly clear references to fertility...This complicated iconography and the provision of space for sleepers to dream--the practice is called incubation—

suggest that the sanctuary was used for communication with the dead and also suggest the role of the spirits in ensuring human fertility."<sup>30</sup> The idea that all life and all fertility of land and humans comes from and returns to somewhere that is not here is a prevailing understanding of the world. In this regard, both tomb and dream symbolically represent the marginality between this world and that world. The ancient ritual action of visiting spiritual ancestors to pray for the prosperity of descendants and get oracles in dreams has survived in the form of pilgrimage to olive-saint complexes to wish for marriage and babies.

The spirits of olive-saint complexes are most often described as *jinn* or rather, primarily, as *jinnīya*. It is notable that folktales of manifestations of *jinnīya* are much more frequent than those of *jinn*, and there are no folktales about human women being married to *jinn*, though there are many of the opposite kind, as described above. I also found that the female appearance of the olive-saint complexes was often based on the image of a bride or wife. In contrast to the appearances of male spirits, who appear as old men with saintly attributes, those of female spirits are beautiful, dressing and acting like brides, and practical, helping like good wives. These features of their appearance indicate the otherness and marginality of brides in accordance with the custom of patrilocal residence in this village. In a patrilocal society, where the bride is taken into the groom's family, the bride is considered peripheral or marginal. While she herself is in transition during the wedding ceremony, she is also an outsider who intervenes in the community's previous

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<sup>30</sup> Brett et al., op. cit., p. 35

daily life from the groom's family's viewpoint. She is the one who is brought in from outside the community, as *baraka* is brought in from outside the world. The female spirit thus symbolizes the similarities between femininity and the sacred in its appearance.

Lastly, the identification of these olive trees with the character of the mother is clearly indicated by the frequent use of the prefix Onm for the saints, as in Onm Zaitouna, which means Mother Olive, or Onm Chemlali, Chemlali being the name of the variety of that olive tree. The olive trees are also strongly connected with rites of passage for women, such as marriage and childbirth. As a part of the wedding ceremony, a *ziyāra* is performed to the clan's olive tree. El Mamoura is visited by brides offering henna and singing an orally inherited song for the saint. She is praised as an eminent lady and is invited to the wedding ceremony.

Mimouna Ya Mimouna

[Mimouna Madame Mimouna]

Sabbari 'ala 'aroug zaytouna

[Water storage for the root of the olive tree]

Ya ndri Ya Khalti

[Madame Mimouna keeps all (water)]

Sabi Ala Gatayeti

[(People) wash (her) trunk]

Gatayeti Madhouna

[(No problem for washing) the trunk is protected with many layers]

Bash Zite Zitouna

[Residue of oil is for the olive tree]

Basha Nadi Khalti

[(Family) comes back to Madame

Mimouna]

Fi 'Aarse Ylala

[(Please come) in (my) marriage, Madame!]31

In this village, an olive tree in flower is sometimes called an '*arousa* (bride)' due to the expectation that it will shortly bear many fruits. Its symbol is embroidered on garments for the wedding ceremony as a charm for a prosperous life. Unmarried girls perform *ziyāra* in order to wish for a good marriage, and the leftover couscous that was prepared and eaten during the *ziyāra* is also said to have good *baraka* for a happy marriage, so each unmarried girl tries to get it competitively. On the palanquin which carries a bride from her house to the groom on the wedding day, an olive branch is placed as a symbol of happiness and fertility. The olive tree is also depicted as a mother in the story of the *jinnīya* Onm Rabbēs. She has a great many daughters, and her prolific nature is a peculiar character of the archaic mother goddess of earth. In the archaic religions, agriculture is symbolically related to procreation and childbirth. It is likely that the association of motherhood with the mother goddess who bestows fertility on the earth and humans is essential to the symbolism of the olive-saint complexes in Village T.

Through this study of the olive-saint complexes in Village T and their relationships with the symbols of ancestor, spirit, and mother, I have concluded that this custom of 'saint veneration' is located outside the framework of Islam. The custom is more closely linked to the archaic symbolism of ancestor veneration, spirit worship, or tree veneration than it is to Islamic faith and practice. The spirits or ancestors associated with the live trees are thought to introduce the fecundity of people,

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31 Song and supplementary explanation from my informant A, female, 90s.

which is connected to the fertility of the earth, from the margins of the world into the world we know. Pilgrimage to olive-saint complexes is a form of worship of the ‘tree of life,’ a symbolic tree with the power to bring people life, which is featured in many religions and is an agricultural ritual whose universal motif is death and rebirth. The original meaning of any agricultural ritual is to see the cosmos as an entire cycle of lives in which the world returns to its beginning and repeats its cosmogony 32 . Among the religious phenomena in Village T, the center of the cycle of lives is the experience of the olive tree as a bridge between the world of spirits and the world of humans comparable to the biblical symbol of a tree as a ladder between heaven and earth. All sacred things such as spirits, ancestors, life, blessings, and supernatural power are experienced as having come from the other place beyond the tree to this world, then returning to their place of origin.

Pilgrims visiting the olive-saint complexes can be inspired to become a new person when they visit on the occasion of a rite of passage, and can be healed and reconditioned in times of trouble; in other words, they can experience the sacred through these pilgrimages. The annual collective pilgrimage to offer olive oil or an animal sacrifice is a return of the harvest, which is symbolic of their lives, to the tree, and thus, symbolically to the origin point outside the world as a repetition of the cosmic cycle. According to the above interpretation, it becomes clear that pilgrimage to olive-saint complexes in Village T is a religious experience of the trees made particularly important by the cultivation of the olive.

## CONCLUSION

The olive tree in southern Tunisia is understood through complex symbolism and holds cultural, social, and religious meaning for the people, as well as being an agricultural product. The people of traditional olive-cultivating villages in southern Tunisia live in a reality in which the religious, agricultural, and other aspects of their lives cannot be separated. Reality is always experienced by humans as a whole, as in the expression of De Bunsen cited at the beginning of this paper. In other words, we perceive our world as a whole cosmos as signified by tradition and experience of the sacred, although in these villages, much of this value has been lost due to population outflow.

This survey of the pilgrimages to olive-saint complexes performed in Village T has revealed that archaic factors from outside Islam still strongly affect the beliefs and practices of the people today. Specifically, the veneration of trees, spirits, ancestors, and the earth mother survives in the form of saint veneration, as Westermarck mentioned. We found that pilgrimages to olive-saint complexes function as agricultural rituals based on the people’s experiences of the tree, in that they awaken a sense of the cosmogony and serve as occasions of healing and renewal in times of trouble. The veneration of olive-saint complexes represents an experience of the renewal of the world through contact with the sacred by means of the peculiar symbolism of the olive tree.

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32 Eliade, op. cit., p.25

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