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The (In)Visibility of Female Saints in Tunisian Sufi Literature

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Among the many religious practices in the Maghreb that have been transmitted through time is the belief in holy people. Such idolatry has also given rise to distinct literary genres such as hagiographies and litanies describing the exceptional roles that Sufi sheikhs play in the social fabric and collective memory, among them also female saints.

- Sufi hagiographies in Tunisia trace the lives and *karāmāt* (mystical occurrences or portents ["prodigies"]) of only the male Sufi leaders, largely disregarding any female *waliyyāt* (Sufi saints; sing. *waliyya*). This reflects the conservative social and gender paradigms that the Maliki school imposed in Tunisia.
- In the absence of formal hagiographic texts, disciples of the Sufi women saints developed various commemorative practices, including the writing and singing of litanies, devotional texts. These litanies construct saintly identity, paralleling hagiography's power to render the unseen perceptible, challenge dominant narratives, and create new spaces for reflection.
- Written to celebrate an 18th-century woman saint, the litany "Umm al-Zayn al-Jammāliyya" engages with contemporary debates on female visibility and invisibility while navigating the woman saint's identity. A close reading of the litany shows to what extent female presence and spiritual authority in litanies challenges and/or upholds prevailing gender norms.
- Zooming in on the litany's storyline, setting, and language helps us to understand how Tunisian Sufi literature conceptualises women's (in)visibility.

CONTEXT

Analysing a litany about a woman reveals the function of Sufi literature in documenting and transmitting Sufi values, historical events, and regional customs. It especially sheds light on how Tunisian Sufi literature conceptualises women's spiritual roles in Maghrebi society, setting the spaces and boundaries within which they exist.

SUFI HAGIOGRAPHY AS A FORM OF ART AND LITERATURE

Between the 9th and 11th century, Sufism developed into different schools and *ṭuruq* (paths, ways; sing. *ṭarīqa*), accompanied by the building of sacred places known as *zawāyā* (sing. *zāwiya*) that were different from mosques. In the Maghreb, *zawāyā* hosted circles of *dhikr* (remembrance) and celebrations or musical shows, promoting the spiritual quality of religion. These buildings stand today as memorials of special individuals whose stories and miracles enlivened collective memory, inflicting "a feeling of transcendence beyond the conditions of the commonplace and the normality of meanings" (Pallasmaa 2015: 19).

To express this spiritual elevation, Sufis experimented with many art forms, amongst them a rich tradition of hagiographic texts. These biographical works about Sufi saints and revered leaders emphasise qualities and virtues, miracles and teachings. In these texts, the Sufi saint is modelled after the prophetic figure of Muḥammad. The primary purpose of such works is not merely to document life events but to inspire devotion and veneration among followers and those committed to a spiritual path, who are known as *murīdūn* (sing. *murīd*). The follower of a Sufi order may attend rituals, recite litanies, and join in gatherings without necessarily undertaking the path of full inner transformation. Most Sufi saints had *murīdūn*, special students whom they trained to transmit their teachings (Amri 2013). In Ifrīqiya (present-day Tunisia), hagiography flourished, with many disciples chronicling the lives of their leaders and saints. These texts are also works of graphic art that combine narratives, symbols, and visual elements to put forth an immersive literary experience.

At the core of the hagiographic text is the saint, the mediator between the divine and human. The Sufi saint, also known as a *walī*, is believed to be a close friend of God whose spiritual and mystical qualities require spiritual sensitivity and mystical subtlety to grasp. The spiritual journey and the willingness to share knowledge confer upon the *walī* a prophet-like archetype. Therefore, hagiographic texts start with the *silsila*, the chain of ancestry tracing the lineage of the saint to the Prophet Muḥammad. As is common knowledge in Islamic Sufism, women are important contributors to the *silsila*, starting with the Prophet's daughter Fāṭima. However, in these hagiographies, female figures and female Sufi saints are absent, though many of them have enlivened the Tunisian collective memory. This absence has triggered a scholarly interest in the position of women in Sufi literature.

WOMEN IN SUFI LITERATURE AND THE CASE OF UMM AL-ZAYN AL-JAMMĀLIYYA

Sufi philosophers such as Ibn ʿArabī (1165–1240), whose ideas deeply influenced Sufism in the Maghreb, emphasised the importance of women and their abilities and aptitudes vis-à-vis gnostic knowledge. After having served Fāṭima bint al-Muthanna of Cordoba for two years, he detailed her role in shaping his philosophical insight about the origins of humanity and the connection between love for women and divine love. What characterised his ideas is a firm belief that femininity is crucial to understanding divine reality (Hakim 2006).

Women were not only muses in Sufism but also established figures who actively participated in and enriched the mystical doctrine and tradition. According to Annemarie Schimmel (1984), women from the Prophet's family, essentially his wife Khadīja and daughter Fāṭima, were the first ones to walk on the path of religious and mystical grandeur. Accounts of early female spiritual leaders detailed practices such as *raḥma* (mercy) and showed they had full control over their *nafs* (desires), representing the initial steps among the seven stages that a Sufi undertakes in their journey to attain sainthood (Qadri 2016). One of these women is the late 17th-century Sufi saint Umm al-Zayn al-Jammāliyya.

Hailing from Awled-Talil, Gafsa, and with a lineage tracing back to Caliph ʿUthmān ibn ʿAffān (r. 644–656), the name Umm al-Zayn al-Jammāliyya is associated with Jemmal, a city in the costal governorate of Monastir. When moving to Jemmal, she settled near the *walī*, Sīdī Faraj al-Anṣārī, drawing from his blessings to heal the sick and save the needy. Due to the scarcity of sources, the influence of the *walī* on the saintly woman is not certain, but the physical proximity would have surely affected the woman's spiritual life (Nabil 1992). Refusing to follow her family back home, the saint remained in Jemmal to fulfill her spiritual call; she was then adopted by the family Saʿīd, who later built a shrine over her tomb to honour her filial and pious qualities bestowed on the villagers. This was related to me when I first visited the shrine on 26 December 2024 by the wife of the shrine's keeper, whose role is to host visitors and share stories about the saint. These bits of information about the saint were not, however, chronicled in a hagiography, surviving oblivion only thanks to oral storytelling shared essentially by women and by the only litany dedicated to a woman Sufi saint, both known as "Umm al-Zayn al-Jammāliyya."

VISIBILITY AND INVISIBILITY IN THE LITANY "UMM AL-ZAYN AL-JAMMĀLIYYA"

For the people of Tunisia, Umm al-Zayn is known as "the lady" (*al-sayyida*) or "the enchanted" (*al-buhliyya*). The well-known Sufi chant celebrates the female saint's dignity and sainthood as she abandoned all earthly pleasures and sought union with God through love and devotion. Among her many names and references in the litany is "Bayat Jemmal," referring to an incident that confirms her prodigies. According to visitors of her shrine and believers in her *wilāya* (saintliness), Hamouda Pasha (1759–1814), an influential Tunisian ruler, was disturbed by her fame and her influence on people, so he decided to imprison her. As she refused to speak in the court, the ruler sentenced her to be devoured by his hungry lions. The following morning he found her sitting in prayer, the lions guarding her. The miraculous power of her *karāmāt* was so strong that Hamouda Pasha turned from a hostile to a believer, ordering for a shrine to be built for her and naming her Bāya of Tunis. Such a title brought her to the same rank as other saints and Sufi leaders in the capital (Al-Amri 1974: 54). However, it is unclear when the litany was composed or what inspired it.

To navigate the spiritual identity of Umm al-Zayn al-Jammāliyya as a saint, I depend on Ala Lassoued's seminal work on pious women in the Maghreb (2020), which identified three aspects of female sainthood: places, forms of worship, and the position of the body. Here, the notion of the female body becomes critical: should it be celebrated or negated? Exploring these features of female sainthood in the litany, we see that the text frames an encounter between two lovers: carrying his gifts and love, the singer is heading in a hurry to the place of his beloved, where she is hiding; he, therefore, calls upon her to come out and meet him. During his hasty journey to her, he recalls the reasons why he is in love with this intriguing woman.

The Visible Zāwiya

In the litany, the Sufi saint is called forth to manifest and meet her *murīd*, who stands on the threshold of the shrine bearing the heavy load of his gifts. Awaiting her approval to enter, the *murīd* adds: "We begin in the name of Allah, / We enter with our gifts adorned with sanctity."

The litany opens thus:

> "Lady, your sanctuary is illuminated
> with *dhikr*
> and good meanings."

Choosing a smaller *zāwiya*, an annex to the mosque, the woman Sufi saint spends her life practising Sufi spiritual exercises, such as *dhikr*, thought to bring about a mystical light that engulfs the place. In terms of architecture, the shrine is built in a way that allows light to enter from different corners. Sufis paid great attention to architecture to reflect their views and beliefs, such as *waḥdat al-wujūd* (the unity of being), where all existence manifests God's essence. This inter-connectedness is symbolised by the dome as not only an emblem of spiritual prestige but also a meeting place of two lovers, as evoked in the litany:

> "O come, beloved Lady,
> present with drums and devotion,
> a dome stands tall atop the shrine of Umm al-Zayn.
> There, the dome is raised, and the well-known sheikh, Baba al-Jilani, is present
> at her side."

The gathering of these holy individuals is celebrated under the dome, which is a potent metaphor for Umm al-Zayn's saintly identity. Such an identity is situated within a cosmic dynamic of interconnected reality where her sacred self can permeate all moments and places as suggested by Ibn ʿArabī's claim that man is the world. The saintly self is thought of as a microcosm where the divine reality transcends all sorts of physical constraints during the circles of *dhikr*. In the litany, this inter-connectedness is evoked through the apparition of Baba al-Jilani, thought to be the initiator of the saint into the path of inner journeying. The language blends physical imagery and symbolic connotations, creating a vivid image of spiritual gatherings in the reader's or listener's mind. However, this meeting, which is held in honour of Umm al-Zayn, can take place only when another male Sufi saint is present.

While an essential aspect of worshiping for the Sufis is spiritual journeying, rare are the women saints in that realm. Though Umm al-Zayn is known as a wandering female traveller moving from one place to another, the litany limits her to the cramped space of her tomb. In the litany, the singer repeats, "Show me the home, so I may come visit you." The tomb has a dual role. Though few Sufi saints have domes built on top of their tombs, which attests to their high status, it is one way to limit the saint's movement. To stop her from wandering, the Sufi woman saint was imprisoned in a small room by her brother, who grew angry with her roaming. The shrine keeper's wife related that the saint invoked a curse on her brother, who then lost his way back home as his camel fell ill. Not knowing what to do and in an act of despair, he called upon Umm al-Zayn to save him. Exhausted by the trip, he fell asleep and dreamed that his sister healed his camel and granted him forgiveness. Once awake, he found his beast ready for the trip back home. When recounting the story, the people of Jemmal became certain that the young girl was an exceptional being and her wandering was that of a saint. What is intriguing is that the tomb was built in the very room in which she was imprisoned by her brother. In line with other saintly stories, the physical location of saints' suffering acquires a sacred quality, turning individual agony into a spiritual legacy for visitors and devotees.

The Invisible Body

In the city of Jemmal, people share tales depicting Umm al-Zayn as an extremely beautiful lady with a heavenly fragrance and henna tattoos, echoes of which we find in the exaggerated repetition of her radiance: "O Lalla, how enchanting is your grace." Both "lalla" and "grace" indicate physical beauty and charm. In Sufism, however, "grace" is seen as a holistic attribute that is not limited to outward appearance, but also encompasses the outcome of acts of mercy, compassion, and moral excellence that grant their holders an aura

of grandeur. As a matter of fact, we notice a delicate avoidance of referring to any physical or bodily attributes in the litany, despite its essentially being an extended love poem.

As seen in the lines: "O Umm al-Zayn, your apparition is unmatched / O woman of the coast!", the Sufi saint is presented as a spirit rather than a physical person. By repeatedly invoking the quality of her spirit-like presence, the text purposefully ignores her physical, embodied existence and corporeality as a woman, reflecting a gendered expectation shaping narratives about female Sufi saints as spiritual, ethereal lovers rather than female objects of romantic desire. This representation raises important questions about the female body, particularly that of the female Sufi saint, and how it can be accepted or represented in the public, religious sphere.

The holy woman's body is characterised by the duality of the purified body and the forgotten body, interconnected in a way that the purified body is a forgotten body and hence a forgotten femininity. Sufis understood the purity of the body as two-layered, a pure body being a divine gift that should be preserved through ablution and cleanliness:

> "Among the sacred things for Sufis are cleanliness, purity, washing clothes, regularly using the miswak (toothbrush), staying near running water, open spaces, mosques on the outskirts of cities, seclusion, bathing every Friday in winter and summer alike, and pleasant fragrance." (Amri 2013: 161)

By sticking to this code of inner and outer cleanliness, these women saints became role models, which explains why the visiting women buy incense, light a candle, and apply henna tattoos when going to the shrine, practising the same purity rituals advocated by their saint. This bodily assimilation allows them to connect with Umm al-Zayn, her attributes, her values. The body of the saint becomes, therefore, a prototype.

In her recounting of Umm al-Zayn's saintly journey from early childhood, the wife of the shrine's keeper framed a story akin to that of Virgin Mary, emphasising qualities of purity, protection, and societal acceptance that can be traced in the Qur'anic representation of Virgin Mary. Ascending to a high rank of purity and chastity, Umm al-Zayn becomes Tunisians' symbol of spiritual femininity and motherhood. The litany accentuates this Marian image of a virgin who dedicates her life to the mystical path when the *murīd* calls upon the saint to heal his pain and end his sorrow. Bringing his gifts, he arrives at her threshold and requests her approval.

> "Umm al-Zayn, you're my healer.
> Come, daughter of Jemmal.
> Don't forget me, Bayat Jemmal,
> don't forget me as I won't forget you
> for as long as I shall live, come, Umm al-Zayn."

In the litany, the saint's identity as mother of virtue is reinforced through the emphasis on her healing powers – the words "you're my healer" indicates prodigies. Much like the Virgin Mary, Umm al-Zayn is perceived as a compassionate advocate for and protector of Islamic tradition, in addition to the values of mercy and devotion (Nabil 1992). Hence, notions of love, marriage, and motherhood, which were denied to these saints in their personal lives, were their very blessings and prodigies. These are the virtues they teach to other women which help them integrate into society.

The Visible Path of Spiritual Awakening

Even in her saintly status, Umm al-Zayn is subordinate to patriarchal structures. Central to the *murshid–murīd* relationship is obedience to the *murshid* (spiritual guide), who possesses unfathomable, prophetic knowledge (Amri 2013: 182). In the litany, it is Baba al-Jilani who embodies this divine knowledge, whereas Umm al-Zayn is just a mirror:

"Holder of the Divine Secret
come forth, O Lalla al-Rayana,
your honour is upheld by our master and renowned sheikh Baba al-Jilani.
Come forth, Umm al-Zayn."

The quoted verses reinforce the central role of the *murshid*, to whom a father-like relationship with Umm al-Zayn is attributed, as this is the only acceptable relationship between a man and a woman in patriarchal, conservative Sunni society. Being the sheikh's disciple signifies his recognition of her potential spiritual growth. However, the litany remains silent about the female Sufi saint's path of ascendance. Lassoued (2020) details the different stages that typically mark a saint's path to holiness, including handshaking, which allows the transmission of divine knowledge from the *murshid* to the *murīd*. This physical connection based on handshaking is glossed over in the case of Umm al-Zayn, as it would be viewed a serious disruption to the dominant patterns of gendered behaviour.

In the absence of a clear statement about Umm al-Zayn's path to holiness, the litany instead sums up the journey using the metaphor of the jasmine:

"We plant a jasmine that shines with your light,
ah, O Named One,
along the valley's path,
ah, girl of Jemmal.
O Lady, O Umm al-Zayn,
How beautiful is your apparition, o coastal saint."

In Sufi thinking, the jasmine is a flower associated with divine beauty and presence. It is through the image of this flower, whose roots reach deep into the ground and whose fragrance recalls heavenly beauty, that Umm al-Zayn achieved the interconnectedness of the external world (*ẓāhir*) with the internal (*bāṭin*). In other words, while the jasmine's external beautiful appearance represents the *ẓāhir*, its roots symbolise the inner *bāṭin*, the unseen reality. Similarly, Umm al-Zayn represents unity between the external world and the internal spiritual realm, illustrating the Sufi process of ascendance, whereby a deeper connection and harmony between the physical world and the divine inner realm is reached through love. The flower becomes, therefore, a metaphor for the kind of Sufi knowledge Umm al-Zayn had achieved.

THE WOMAN SUFI SAINT AND THE PATRIARCHY

While the popular narrative depicts Umm al-Zayn as the mother to whom everyone turns to relieve anguish, ameliorate misery, and heal the sick, the litany is in the form of a love ballad where the *murīd* calls upon his beloved to come out and end his agony. This duality of perception raises an important issue in relation to the sainthood of the woman Sufi, which is that of the body. In a society where acknowledging the sainthood of a woman is not a given, the female body must be rendered invisible. Claiming sainthood by overlooking the female saint's body highlights the body's crucial role in the dynamics of visibility and invisibility. The litany's textual emphasis on calling upon the saint to come out is framed within a patriarchal structure that reinforces a male-driven composition and performance. The tension caused by the simultaneous perception of Umm al-Zayn as a spiritual entity and the erasure of her as a physical presence renders the female body a contested site of spiritual power filtered through patriarchal control.

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