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The Qur'anic Meaning of al-Zaytūn: A Corpus-Based Semantic, Semiotic, and Stylistic Analysis

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Abstract

This study examines the Qur'anic mentions of olives through a semiotic, semantic, and stylistic approach supported by a digital corpus. The Quranic Arabic Corpus (QAC) was searched for the root z-y-t, and each retrieved token was recorded by its position, surface form, and verse context, then cross-checked against the Uthmani text of Tanzil v1.1. The search yielded seven tokens across six verses: five categorized as zaytūn, one as zaytūnat, and one oil-related token, zaytuhā. Of these seven tokens, six referring to an olive or olive tree were treated as primary data, while zaytuhā in QS 24:35, which refers to the oil associated with the olive tree, was retained as contextual data rather than counted as an additional mention of the olive. In four of the six verses, olives appear in contexts involving water, plant growth, crops, food, or harvest; QS 24:35 places the olive tree within the parable of light, while QS 95:1 includes the olive in an expression of oath. The ecological reading identifies three relationships supported by the verses and relevant interpretations: the dependence of plant growth on water and natural processes, the role of agricultural produce in meeting human and livestock needs, and the prohibition of excess in the context of agricultural use and harvesting. These relationships are interpreted as resonating with contemporary notions of sustainability, rather than as the lexical meaning of the word olive or as an ecological doctrine explicitly stated by the verses.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The natural element in the Qur'an is not only present as a literal referent, but is also placed in the network of meaning and rhetorical structure of the verse. The olive (al-zaytūn) is relevant to be studied because it appears in a non-uniform context: as a part of plants and produce, as an imagery element in the parable of light, and as part of an expression of oath. Such contextual differences demand a clear separation between lexical meaning, linguistic function, interpretation interpretation, and contemporary ecological reading.

Islamic ecological studies have developed a variety of frameworks to discuss the relationship between humans, nature, responsibility, and environmental ethics [1], [2]. Ecolinguistics, on the other hand, examines how language represents and shapes the way humans understand the ecological world [3], [4]. Both frameworks can be used to read the contemporary relevance of verses about nature, but do not justify the direct transfer of modern terms such as sustainability, climate resilience, or green economy into the lexical meaning of a single word of the Qur'an.

The research problem lies in the need to explain the relationship between linguistic data and ecological interpretation in a traceable manner. Mention of olives needs to be fully inventoried, its surface form needs to be distinguished from its basic form or morphological category, and any ecological interpretation must be anchored to the co-text of the verse as well as the relevant sources of interpretation. The annotated Qur'anic corpus helps to systematically find the form and location of the

token, but the annotation must still be treated critically because the QAC itself opens up the possibility of correction to the annotation [5]–[7].

Based on these problems, this study answers three questions: (1) in what verse and in what surface form does the root token z-y-t appear; (2) what is the semantic, semiotic, and stylistic context of the mention; and (3) what ecological relationships are really supported by the co-text of the verse and interpretation so that it can be read in a limited way in contemporary sustainability discourse? The goal is to compile a transparent corpus inventory, conduct contextual readings, and clearly distinguish between textual evidence and contemporary interpretation. The contribution of the research lies in the accuracy of the data and argumentation, not in the submission of new ecological theories.

1.1 Digital corpus and language studies

Corpus linguistics uses a systematically searchable set of language data to observe the form, distribution, and context of word usage. Concordance helps researchers compare each occurrence of a form in its context; therefore, the number of occurrences is not treated as evidence of meaning by itself [8], [9], [10]. The use of the digital corpus in humanities studies becomes relevant when computing devices play a direct role in the search and formation of data, not just as a means of typing [11]. QAC provides morphological annotations, syntax, and lexical information for Qur'anic texts. The documentation shows that annotations are constructed collaboratively and can accept corrections. Therefore, this study uses QAC for root identification, surface shape, and token position, while context and interpretation are not based on QAC glosses alone [5]–[7], [12]. This separation of functions is important so that corpus annotations are not treated as interpretation.

1.2 Semiotics, semantics, and stylistics

In a semiotic framework, signs are read through the relationship between the present form and the concept constructed in the context [13]. The distinction between denotation and connotation in Barthes [14] is used here in a limited way: denotation refers to the olive, the olive tree, or its oil as textual referents, while connotation is examined through their relationships with other elements in the verse. This study does not establish the olive as a "myth of sustainability," because such a claim cannot be substantiated by the seven tokens of the z-y-t root alone. Semantic analysis focuses on the relationship between word meaning and its context of use. Izutsu's approach to Qur'anic semantics [15] emphasizes that the meaning of a word should be understood within the network of usage and concepts surrounding it rather than in isolation. Stylistic analysis examines the choice of linguistic forms and rhetorical structures in the verses, particularly the parable of light in QS 24:35 and the expression of oath in QS 95:1. Accordingly, terms such as "metaphor," "symbol," and "oath expression" are used only when supported by the textual features of the relevant verses.

In relation to the research questions, corpus-based identification establishes the location and surface forms of the z-y-t tokens, addressing RQ1. Semantic analysis addresses RQ2 by examining the meanings of olive-related expressions in relation to their surrounding textual contexts. Semiotic analysis further addresses RQ2 by distinguishing the textual referents of olives from contextual associations that emerge within each verse. Stylistic analysis also contributes to RQ2 by identifying the rhetorical functions of the olive in the parable of light in QS 24:35 and the oath in QS 95:1. These complementary readings, considered alongside relevant Qur'anic interpretations, provide the textual basis for RQ3: identifying ecological relationships that are supported by the verses and interpretations and assessing their relevance to contemporary sustainability discourse without equating such interpretations with the lexical meaning of the olive.

1.3 Ecological reading criteria

The ecological reading in this study works on two levels. The first level is the textual relationship that can be shown directly from the co-text, for example the relationship between water and plant growth, produce and food and utilization, or harvest with excessive prohibition. The second level is contemporary resonance, which is the reading of these relationships through the discourse of environmental ethics and sustainability [1], [2]. An ecological claim is only defended if it has a foothold in the co-text of the verse and, when necessary, interpretation; the claim is not treated as an olive dictionary meaning. Because this study does not collect agronomic, social, or policy data, the biological

properties of olives, their impact on cultivation, and their relationship with modern sustainability indicators are not used as a result of the study [16].

2. METHOD

This study uses a descriptive qualitative method assisted by a digital corpus. The main search source is the Quranic Arabic Corpus, specifically the triliteral root entry z-y-t, which contains token positions, Arabic forms, transliterations, and concise glosses [18]. The search was conducted by examining the occurrences listed under this root entry. All retrieved occurrences were included in the corpus inventory; no sampling was applied. For each occurrence, the surah, verse, and token position provided by QAC, together with the Arabic form, transliteration, and surface form, were recorded. This procedure yielded seven tokens distributed across six verses.

To cross-check the retrieved occurrences, each QAC record was located in the corresponding surah and verse of the Uthmani text of Tanzil v1.1 [17], [26]. The target Arabic word or segment was then compared with the corresponding form in the full verse context. A match was recorded when the surah and verse location and the corresponding Arabic segment agreed with the QAC record. The matched segments and verification status are reported in Table 1, allowing readers to trace each retrieved occurrence to its corresponding location in the reference text. This procedure verifies the correspondence of the verse location and target Arabic segment; it does not independently validate the morphological or lexical annotations provided by QAC. Tanzil v1.1 is therefore used for textual cross-checking and verse location, not as an independent source of morphological annotation. The unit of analysis is each retrieved z-y-t root token considered together with the co-text of its verse. The seven tokens comprise one oil-related form categorized as zayt, five zaytūn forms, and one zaytūnat form in the QAC entry [18]. Six tokens that refer to an olive or olive tree constitute the primary data, whereas zaytuhā in QS 24:35, referring to the oil associated with the olive tree, is retained as contextual data because it occurs within the same rhetorical sequence. The lexical or form categories are distinguished from the surface forms appearing in the verses, such as zaytūnatin and wazaytūnan. This distinction prevents the retrieved token count, lexical categories, and actual surface forms from being treated as interchangeable.

The analysis proceeded in five stages. First, all occurrences listed under the QAC root entry z-y-t were recorded, including their token positions and surface forms. Second, each occurrence was cross-checked against Tanzil v1.1 using its surah and verse location, and the corresponding Arabic segment and verification status were entered into Table 1. Third, the co-text of each verse was examined to identify its textual context, including plants and agricultural produce, water and plant growth, utilization and harvesting, the parable of light, or an expression of oath. Fourth, semantic, semiotic, and stylistic analyses were conducted while distinguishing lexical references from contextual associations and rhetorical functions. Fifth, the resulting interpretations were compared with relevant classical Qur'anic exegesis, particularly the works of al-Ṭabarī and Ibn Kathir [19]–[25]. The classification of each occurrence as primary or contextual data, as well as its assignment to a textual category, was based on the researcher's contextual reading. The rationale for these decisions is reported in Table 1.

The small size of the corpus is not treated as a major limitation because the analysis covers all occurrences retrieved through the specified QAC root search rather than a sample drawn from a larger set of occurrences. This completeness is relative to the records returned by that search and does not establish that the corpus annotations are infallible. The principal limitations are the narrow lexical scope and the interpretive nature of the analysis; consequently, the findings cannot be generalized to the representation of nature throughout the Qur'an. The study does not employ statistical tests, infer theological intent from token frequency, or equate contemporary ecological resonance with lexical meaning. The explicit search scope, token inventory, textual cross-checking procedure, and stated categorization criteria are intended to make the analysis transparent and traceable.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 Corpus Search Results

Table 1 records all seven z-y-t root tokens: the position and surface shape of the QAC [18], the Arabic segment for matching with Tanzil v1.1 [17], [26], the status of the data, as well as the basis of categorization.

Table 1. Corpus Search Results

Verse / QAC position	QAC surface form	QAC lexical form / category	Arabic segment checked against Tanzil v1.1	Text check	Analytical status and grouping rationale
QS 6:99 (6:99:28)	wal-zaytūna	zaytūn (noun; olives)	وَالزَّيْتُونَ	Match	Primary. Plant/produce context linking water, plant growth, gardens, and fruits.
QS 6:141 (6:141:12)	wal-zaytūna	zaytūn (noun; olives)	وَالزَّيْتُونَ	Match	Primary. Agricultural produce, utilization, harvest rights, and the prohibition of isrāf.
QS 16:11 (16:11:5)	wal-zaytūna	zaytūn (noun; olives)	وَالزَّيْتُونَ	Match	Primary. Water–growth context; olives are included among plants sustained by water.
QS 24:35 (24:35:21)	zaytūnatin	zaytūnat (noun; olive / olive tree)	زَيْتُونَةٍ	Match	Primary. The olive tree appears within the imagery of the parable of light.
QS 24:35 (24:35:27)	zaytuhā	zayt (noun; oil), with the pronominal suffix -hā (“its”)	زَيْتُهَا	Match	Contextual. Refers to the oil associated with the olive tree in the same parable, not an additional primary reference to an olive or olive tree.
QS 80:29 (80:29:1)	wazaytūnan	zaytūn (noun; olives)	وَزَيْتُونًا	Match	Primary. Food/produce context within a sequence of water, earth, plants, food, and benefits for humans and livestock.
QS 95:1 (95:1:2)	wal-zaytūni	zaytūn (noun; olive)	وَالزَّيْتُونِ	Match	Primary. The olive occurs within the structure of an oath.

Note: A root-search token refers to an occurrence retrieved under the triliteral root z-y-t in the QAC, not necessarily to a word appearing in an uninflected root form. The QAC records seven occurrences across six verses in three derived noun forms: zayt (one occurrence), zaytūn (five occurrences), and zaytūnat (one occurrence). The “QAC surface form” column reproduces the form occurring in the verse, including attached conjunctions, grammatical inflection, and the pronominal suffix in zaytuhā. The “QAC lexical form / category” column identifies the corresponding derived noun form. In QS 24:35, zaytuhā is the surface form associated with zayt (“oil”), with the suffix -hā meaning “its.” It is included in the seven-token root-search inventory but treated as contextual data because it refers to oil rather than constituting an additional primary reference to the olive or olive tree. “Match” indicates correspondence between the QAC record's verse location and target Arabic segment and the Tanzil v1.1 text; it does not independently validate the morphological annotations provided by QAC.

3.2 Context of Olive Mention

Four verses place the olive in the series of plants, produce, or food: 6:99, 6:141, 16:11, and 80:29. This grouping is not based on the word olive in isolation, but on its co-text. Qur'an 6:99 relates the descent of water to the discharge of plants and fruits; al-Ṭabarī describes olives and pomegranates as part of the produce produced in the series [21]. Qur'an 16:11 explicitly mentions plants, olives, dates, grapes, and fruits as something grown with water; al-Ṭabarī reads them as sustenance and a sign to meditate [23]. In QS 80:24–32, olives are in the order of food, water, hemispheres, plants, fruits, and benefits for humans and livestock [24], [25].

3.3 Semantic Meaning and Signs

The results of the search show that the difference in morphological shapes has an effect on the accuracy of interpretation. The QAC distinguishes zayt (oil), zaytūn (olive), and zaytūnat (olive tree), while the surface shape changes according to grammatical constructions, e.g. zaytūnatin in 24:35 and

wazaytūnan in 80:29 [18]. In 24:35, zaytūnatin and zaytuhā are present in a series: a tree called mubārakah is the source of oil used in the image of light. The meaning of 'light' is therefore born from the arrangement of the parable—lamp, glass, tree, oil, and light—not from the lexical meaning of zaytūn. Ibn Kathir also places trees and oil qualities in the explanation of the parable [20].

In semiotic readings, the denotative reference to the olive is most clearly seen in the context of plants and produce. The connotations of blessing and light appear most in Qur'an 24:35 because the nature of the mubārakah is expressed in the text and the olive tree is placed in the structure of the parable. In contrast, Qur'an 95:1 derives rhetorical power from the structure of the oath. Al-Ṭabarī notes that the olive in the verse can be understood as an olive that is known and squeezed out of its oil, while recording another opinion linking it to the place where the olive grows [19]. This variation shows that a single symbol cannot be imposed on all appearances.

3.4 Language Style and Ecological Reading

Stylistically, Qur'an 24:35 and Qur'an 95:1 show the different functions of the four verses themed on the produce of the earth. Qur'an 24:35 constructs the parable of light through a series of concrete imagery, including the olive tree and its oil, while Qur'an 95:1 uses the olive as part of the oath-structure. Both verses enhance the associative power and alienation of the olive in the Qur'anic discourse, but do not provide a textual basis for referring to the olive as an explicit metaphor for renewable energy, the green economy, or the modern sustainability system.

The relationship with sustainability becomes stronger when it is drawn from the relationship that is indeed expressed by the verse, not from the overly broad symbolism. In QS 6:99 and QS 16:11, water is the condition for the exit of plants and food products [21], [23]. In QS 80:24–32, the water–earth–plant–food–human/livestock sequence shows the dependence of the needs of life on natural processes [24], [25]. This relationship can be read, at a contemporary level, as a reminder that the fulfillment of human needs is within the ecological network, not separate from it. This reading is in line with Islamic ecological concern for the relationship between humans and nature [1], [2], but remains a contextual interpretation.

3.5 Ecological Relations Supported by Texts and Interpretations

The most direct ecological relationship is found in the verses of the produce of the earth. Qur'an 6:99 and Qur'an 16:11 both place plant growth in dependence on water; tafsir al-Ṭabarī affirms water as the cause of the release of plants, fruits, sustenance, and food in the context of these two verses [21], [23]. The series of Qur'an 80:24–32 even links attention to food with the outpouring of water, the division of the earth, the growth of grains, grapes, olives, dates, gardens, fruits, and finally benefits for humans and livestock [24], [25]. Textually, this pattern suggests that the needs of human life are represented as dependent on interconnected natural processes.

QS 6:141 adds an ethical dimension to the context of production and harvesting. After mentioning gardens, dates, plants, olives, and pomegranates, the verse commands the utilization of the crop, the granting of rights on harvest day, and the prohibition of isrāf. Al-Ṭabarī notes several explanations of the form of isrāf and ultimately understands the prohibition in general as a prohibition beyond the boundary. This study does not equate the prohibition with modern conservation policy, but the co-text of agriculture and the limits of use provide a stronger argumentative bridge for a reading of sustainability than simply making the olive an ecological symbol.

3.6 Discussion

Corpus-assisted analysis clarifies the boundaries between data inventory and interpretation. The corpus answers questions about the location, number, and shape of the tokens; close reading explains the function of the tokens within the verse. This separation is in line with the linguistic practice of the corpus which demands that observed patterns be re-examined in context, rather than interpreted solely on the basis of frequency [9], [10]. In this study, the verification traces in Table 1 also reduce the risk of mixing base shapes with surface shapes.

Substantively, the term 'sustainability' in the title of the article can best be accounted for as an interpretive layer of three relational patterns. First, water and soil relate to the growth of food plants in 6:99, 16:11, and the series of QS 80:24–32. Second, plants and produce are placed as a source of benefit or food for humans and, in QS 80:32, for livestock. Third, QS 6:141 links gardens and crops to the commandment of utilization, fulfillment of rights on harvest day, and the prohibition of isrāf. Al-Ṭabarī interprets the prohibition broadly as a prohibition to go beyond boundaries in the context of giving and entitlement to produce [22]. These three patterns are not the same as modern theories of sustainability, but provide a more concrete textual basis for discussing the responsible use and utilization of natural products.

The boundaries of interpretation still need to be maintained. QS 24:35 is primarily a parable of light, so the quality of trees and oils should not be directly transformed into agronomic or energy claims. QS 95:1 is a structure of oaths with diverse interpretations, so its rhetorical value is not synonymous with the message of conservation. Thus, this study distinguishes three levels of inference: the form and location of tokens as corpus data; the function and relationships in the verse as a result of textual reading; and sustainability as a contemporary reading that must be given methodological boundaries.

From the point of view of digital Islamicate humanities, the method's contribution lies in data traceability: the searched root is declared, the entire token is listed, the surface shape is distinguished from the lemma category, the text-check source is separated from the annotation source, and the categorization reasons are made explicit. This approach is more appropriate for a small corpus than adding statistical procedures that do not answer the research question. Further development can compare olives with other plant terms using the same verification protocol before drawing broader generalizations [11].

4. CONCLUSION

Regarding RQ1, the search of the Quranic Arabic Corpus (QAC) identified seven tokens of the root z-y-t across six verses, comprising one zayt category token, five zaytūn tokens, and one zaytūnat token. Six tokens referring to an olive or olive tree were treated as primary data, while zaytuhā in QS 24:35 was retained as contextual data because it refers to the associated oil. The differences between lexical categories and surface forms, including zaytūnatin in QS 24:35 and wazaytūnan in QS 80:29, were documented and cross-checked against the Uthmani text of Tanzil v1.1. Regarding RQ2, the contextual analysis showed that four verses place the olive within contexts of plants, agricultural produce, food, or harvesting, whereas QS 24:35 incorporates the olive tree into the parable of light and QS 95:1 uses the olive in an expression of oath. These findings demonstrate that the semantic, semiotic, and stylistic functions of the olive depend on the context and rhetorical structure of each verse rather than on a single uniform symbolic meaning. Regarding RQ3, the co-textual analysis and relevant classical interpretations support three ecological relationships: the dependence of plant growth on water and natural processes, the contribution of agricultural produce to human and livestock needs, and the limitation of agricultural use through the prohibition of *isrāf* in QS 6:141. These relationships provide a basis for reading the verses in relation to contemporary sustainability discourse, but they do not establish sustainability as the lexical meaning of the olive or as an ecological doctrine explicitly stated by the verses. By distinguishing corpus evidence, contextual interpretation, and contemporary ecological resonance, this study provides a traceable account of the Qur'anic mentions of the olive while keeping its conclusions within the limits of the data.

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