



EXTRACT 3 – Sacred trees

Have you ever woken up the middle of the night and seen the trees heaving and sighing outside your bedroom window? Has it ever seemed to you that there were faces in that greenery, faces that were grinning, grimacing, mouthing words which were rushed away by the winds and lost to your ears?

That was me.

When people make a connection with a tree, or a stone for that matter, this involves more than merely the physical tree or stone. What is taking place is a *hierophany*, a manifestation of another dimension often termed “the sacred”. The tree is revealing something which would otherwise be hidden from us, something which is *ganz andere*, from another realm, and of a deeper reality than the ever-changing appearance of things. Our pragmatic focus on the immediate and the particular means that sometimes we can’t appreciate the whole picture because we are obsessed with certain details; we can’t grasp the depths because we remain doggedly and dogmatically on the surface; we can’t, in short, see the wood for the trees.

What was I revealing to you when you saw me that night?

The Leshy is a tree spirit who lives in the birch forests of Russia and is described as having green bark-like skin and green hair. “He springs from tree to tree and rocks himself in the branches, screeching and laughing, neighing, lowing and barking”.*

That's me up there.

The neighbouring Finns have their own tree spirit, Tapio, who is said to be very tall and slender with a long brown beard, a green coat of moss and a hat of fir leaves. His partner is Mielikki, the honey-rich mother of the woodland and the hostess of glen and forest.

The verdant couple are both me.

Swiss folkore tells of "green ladies" who sing and dance beneath the branches of oak trees. They are known for enticing men away and dragging them through the undergrowth to strip them of their possessions.

Watch out for me lurking within those beguiling Alpine forests!

Have you heard of the oak-men of Germany, dwarves who guard the sacred oak groves? Or of the oak-men in the old forests of England? The latter are far from being dwarves: their body-trunks are lofty and solid, their feet firmly planted in the ground, but their spirits are free. They are no trouble to anyone. Unless, of course, you start chopping them down, at which point they become very dangerous indeed.

In either case, they are me.

Sometimes a spirit lives *in* a tree and sometimes it *is* the tree. The Ancient Greeks often spoke of dryads, oak nymphs who were closely related to Meliai (ash nymphs), Epimeliad (apple), and Caryatids (walnut). These were the spirits *of* the trees, but there were also nymphs called hamadryads, who *were* the physical trees themselves. These direct daughters of nature included Karya (hazelnut), Balanos (oak), Kraneia (dogwood), Morea (mulberry), Aigeiros (black poplar), Ptelea (elm), Ampelos (vines) and Syke (fig).

In African traditions, trees are usually regarded as merely *bintu* or "frozen" forces, but some are seen as exceptions. In these special trees the water of the depths, the primal *nommo*, the world of the ancestors, rises up spontaneously; the trees are the road travelled by the spirits, the loas.

For North American Indians such as the Hidatsa tribe of North Dakota, every natural object, such as a tree, has its spirit or shade.

Spirit-tree and tree-spirit, all are me.

A tree resembles a human figure, with its upright posture and protruding arms. It also links the upper and lower worlds, with its roots drawing water from the earth below, its leaves drinking energy from the sun above and its branches and fruit providing shelter and sustenance for life on the surface. It is a vertical cosmic axis.

The idea of the Tree of Life, the Centre of the World, appears in human culture throughout the world, from the Gaokerena world tree of the Persians to the Egyptians' Holy Sycamore, which stands on the threshold of life and death, connecting the two realms. We meet it again as the Islamic Tree of Immortality and as the Christian version representing the immaculate state of humanity before the fall and then appearing again as the redeeming cross on which Christ dies. It is the Bo tree, or Bodhi tree, under which the Buddha sits when he attains Enlightenment and it is the Hindus' Eternal Banyan Tree (*Akshaya Vata*) beside the Yamuna river. It is Grandmother Cedar, Nookomis Giizhig, of the Ojibwe of Turtle Island and Yggdrasil, the World Ash of the Nordic peoples.

"Their holy places are the woods and groves, and they call by name of god that hidden presence which is seen only by the eye of reverence".

Tacitus was describing Germanic tribes 2,000 years ago, but those northern European peoples, inhabiting vast and unspoiled primaeval forests, were far from alone in their reverence of trees.

Back home in Rome, within the Forum which was the bustling heart of the city, stood the sacred fig-tree of Romulus, which was worshipped right through to the days of the Empire. And nearby on the slope of the Palatine hill grew a sacred dogwood tree. If it ever appeared to be drooping, the alarm was sounded and a crowd would rush to the spot with buckets of water to restore its health.

Even in the first century of our era, in the times of Pliny the Elder, a noble Roman was reported to worship a beech tree in a grove sacred to Diana. He would embrace it, kiss it, lie under its shadow and pour wine onto its trunk, regarding it as a goddess.

In Ancient Greece, Dodona was one of the most revered sacred sites and second only to Delphi in significance. In the same way that Delphi was originally dedicated to Gaia and then later to Apollo, Dodona was sacred to the Mother Goddess Dione before it became focused on Zeus. It was renowned for its oak tree, whose leaf-rustlings were interpreted by priests and priestesses devoted to the oracle. The Sacred Oak of Dodona was described by Aeschylus as "a lofty and beautiful tree, an incredible wonder" and was regarded as the Tree of Life.

The Yaqui people of northern Mexico tell of a talking tree that once delivered an important prophecy to the *surem*, the Little People that then inhabited the land. It warned them of the arrival of white people, bringing with them weapons, railways and bloodshed. The *surem* took the hint and disappeared to live underground from that day on.

Asherah was a Semitic manifestation of the Great Goddess and closely identified with trees. She was known both as Queen of Heaven and as the Tree of Life. Her name is often translated as "grove" or "groves" and she was represented in early Jewish temples by Asherim or Asherah poles, which were carved wooden pillars. She is thought to have

been more important than her male aspect Yahweh until the patriarchal *coup d' état* which diverted the course of Jewish religion.

My Asherim may have been felled, but my roots still run deep within the universal psyche of humankind.

Paying due respects to trees is important, whether you install and decorate one in your home at midwinter or dance around one at May Day or Midsummer. Tree dressing is a tradition from Thailand to Ireland, from Finland to France, from Scotland to Sri Lanka, and if you participate in these customs you are worshipping the deep vital energies which are represented by trees.

And by me, in all my guises.

Whatever form I take, I am often hated and feared by Authority, particularly when Church combines with Empire to soul-stifling effect.

Tree worship was an important element of the popular worship of Osiris in Ancient Egypt, but was repressed by the aristocratic priests of the Established Church who had begun to rewrite popular myth according to their own tastes as early as 2800 BCE. This nature-embracing aspect of Osirianism was only officially recognised under the Macedonian Ptolemies in around 300 BCE.

Patriarchal Jewish efforts to stamp out paganism specifically targeted the tree worship associated with Asherah. Deuteronomy, the fifth book of the Torah and the Christian Old Testament, tells how God ordered the Israelites: “Ye shall utterly destroy all the places, wherein the nations which ye shall possess served their gods, upon the high mountains, and upon the hills, and under every green tree: And ye shall overthrow their altars, and break their pillars, and burn their groves [Asherah] with fire; and ye shall hew down the graven images of their gods, and destroy the names of them out of that place”.

When Julius Caesar destroyed the sacred grove of Marseilles during the Siege of Massalia in 49 BCE it may have served a military purpose, and reflected his contempt for the southern French city's Greek culture, but he also systematically used the destruction of druidic groves as a weapon against Celtic resistance to Roman rule.

The word druid comes from *derwydd*, the Welsh term for “oak-seer”, and their powerful culture and vision represented a serious challenge to the authority of Empire.

When the Romans became Christianised, they carried on hacking down the pagan groves with an additional religious pretext for their imperialism and this Good Fight was taken up enthusiastically by subsequent followers of Jesus.

The Five Sacred Trees of Ireland were cut down in 665 CE, in a war against the Old Ways which, 200 years previously, had already seen the Christian St Patrick destroy an

important library of ancient books incised in the ogham tree-alphabet on bark or rods of hazel and aspen.

St Boniface, an Anglo-Saxon Christian missionary to Germany in the eighth century, had the tree-worshipping folk of Hesse meet him at the sacred oak of Thor at Geismar. As they watched, he struck at the tree with an axe and, apparently, the oak burst magically into the shape of a cross. The wood was used to build a chapel dedicated to a new religion based on dominating nature rather than loving it.

When Charlemagne defeated the Saxons in the same century he outlawed their offerings to sacred trees. His successors were still at it 500 years later, with the Synod of Trier in 1227 decreeing that the worship of trees was forbidden. The fact that they had to keep passing these edicts tells you that they had previously met with little success. My *nemetons*, my sacred places, rise up again and again. All their efforts will never uproot my strength!

The Basques' sacred oak, the Gernikako Arbola, survived the fascist bombings of Guernica in 1937. When Francoist troops took the town, the fascist and centralists Falangists wanted to fell the tree because it was a symbol of Basque nationalism, but their localist Basque Carlist allies put an armed guard around it to protect it. The Guernica oak of 1937 later died, fungus-struck, as did its replacement. But its real essence, and my animating spirit, is never confined to any one temporary shell. Acorns, physical and metaphorical, will always survive to ensure that the life force sprouts up again, refreshed and renewed, in generation after generation of humans and trees. The Gernikako Arbola lives on.

And so do I.

The centre of Paris is full of monuments to Christianity, the French Republic and the modern cult of ostentatious consumption. But, not far from the Gothic splendour of Notre-Dame, the pomp of the Hôtel de Ville and the boutiques of le Marais, there is a reminder of a different history in the elm of Saint-Gervais, a sacred tree whose likeness is even carved on the inside of the adjacent church. Its original meaning forgotten over time, it came to be associated with the idea of feudal justice under the *Ancien Régime* and for that reason is believed to have been chopped down in the Revolution of 1789, though later replaced. There is said to have been some disagreement over whether the elm represented justice or freedom. An absurd quarrel, since the two ideas are inseparable from each other.

And from me.

In India, trees were once so sacred that there was even a custom of marrying men and women to them. In 1730 the Maharaja of Jodhpur sent his men into the forests near the Bishnoi village of Khejadali, to collect timber for his new palace. A local woman called Amrita Devi rushed to a tree to protect it, but was immediately axed to death. Many other villagers, mostly women and children, followed suit and by the end of the day more

than 360 lay dead. When the Maharaja heard this news, he was horrified and called his men off. Many trees have, of course, been felled there since then, but the Bishnoi forests remain a relative oasis of greenery in the denuded landscape of Rajasthan.

Some 240 years later, still in India, labourers arrived near the village of Reni in Uttarakhand, beside the Alaknanda river, with the task of felling 2,500 trees. A local girl saw them and rushed to tell Gaura Devi, who led 27 of the village women to the site and confronted the loggers. When the workmen refused to listen and started to insult them and threaten them with guns, the women resorted to hugging the trees to stop them from being felled. They kept an all-night vigil guarding their trees, the news of the movement spread to neighbouring villages, more people joined in and, after four days, the loggers left.

When you hug a tree, you embrace life itself.

Do you remember the battle to save the sweet chestnut tree that had flourished on George Green in Wanstead, London, for 250 years? It had the audacity to get in the way of the M11 Link Road, yet another extension of the infrastructure of global death. One day in 1993, many centuries after tree worship had been banned by those-who-know-best, a group of local parents and children led by the Pied Lollipop Lady of Wanstead turned up to perform a tree dressing ceremony and were confronted by security fencing. Along with other protesters, they jubilantly pulled down the barriers to reach the tree. Have you seen the film footage of the day when the Forces of Imperial Order came in their hundreds to murder the tree? Did you see the hatred on their faces, did you witness the violence with which they carried out the commands of their death-cult masters? Did you hear the wail of despair that arose when the tree finally came down after a ten-hour struggle? Did you embrace the timeless pain felt centuries ago when the sacred groves were destroyed? Did you want to cry too? Do you still think your human bond with trees, with the spirit of the trees, with the spirit of nature, is a thing of the past?

I am here to tell you that it is a thing of the future. I am your future.

* Mrs J. H. Philpot, *The Sacred Tree in Religion and Myth* (New York: Dover, 2004. Originally 1897), p. 69

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