

# Forest and tree symbolism in folklore

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*Symbolic meanings acquired by trees and forests through centuries of human existence remain in language, lore and culture.*

Trees and forests, probably because of their great size and sometimes longevity, vividly affected the imagination of preliterate societies. They were alive like human beings and animals, but did not move from place to place; like mountains and stones they seemed immobile, but at the same time could change and sway. Dense forests may have seemed mysterious. Even lone trees, particularly in a barren spot, may have appeared miraculous if they provided food for a starving wanderer. Trees were seen and touched by the earliest humans; utilized for food, fuel, shelter, clothing, fences and barriers, lances and spears; and burned, cut or transformed into numerous objects. Their shadows provided cover, camouflage and hiding places for persons on either side of the law. Over time, forests and individual species of trees have come to represent different concepts in the imaginations of populations living in various geographical locations. Whether trees were numerous or scarce in a given locality influenced how they were perceived and dealt with in legends, mythologies and cultures.

This article touches on some of the symbolic meanings acquired by trees and forests through the centuries of human existence. It is intended as a general exploration of a vast subject – a toe in the water, or more aptly, sending out roots – and does not pretend to be comprehensive, historically or geographically.

## FORESTS, TREES AND THE DIVINE

There is some speculation that trees struck by lightning and consumed in the resulting fire, observed by prehistoric societies, may have given rise to the idea that the divinities inhabited the heavens as well as the earth (Brosse, 1989; Harrison, 1992). It has been speculated that in the early Mediterranean civilizations, early forest clearings were “religious ac-

tions” because primitive people needed to see the sky better in order to read the divine signs sent down to humans from an abstract “above” that was identified with the sky (Harrison, 1992). Thus cutting down trees may not only have been carried out to make clearings for settlements and agriculture; it may also have been considered a necessary gesture in order for humans to know their gods. Through the spread of Greek culture, the Roman empire, and the revival of Greek thought in the Renaissance, an association of trees with spiritual and intellectual “shadow” and their cutting down with “enlightenment” may have made its way into the collective unconscious throughout Europe.

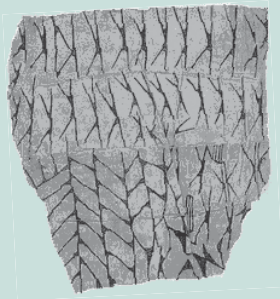
Deciduous forests and their seasonal cycles of falling and growing leaves, or new growth sprouting from the base of burnt or cut trunks, may have induced people to regard trees as symbols for an eternal and indestructible life force.

Trees and forests thus took on symbolic divine characteristics, or were seen to represent superlative forces such as courage, endurance or immortality. They were the means of communication between worlds. Some societies made them into magical totems. Sometimes a particular tree was considered to be sacred because of association with a holy individual, saint or prophet. Trees have frequently held great religious significance, for example the tree under which the Buddha received enlightenment and the tree used for the crucifixion of Jesus. As a result they often featured in religious rituals, and still do today. Examples include trees upon which prayers or offerings are hung in many different cultures, and the Christmas tree, a custom whose present form evolved in Europe in the nineteenth century.

In the Shinto religion of Japan, which sanctifies nature, the sakaki (*Cleyera japonica*) is especially sacred. The

## Mbuti arts and traditions – a culture derived from the forest

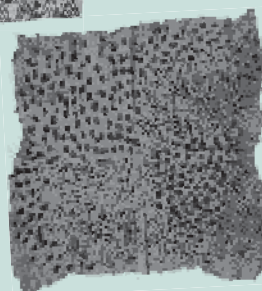
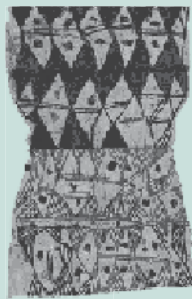
*The Mbuti people of the Ituri forest in the Democratic Republic of the Congo decorate barkcloths with abstract imagery that expresses the life, motion, sound and shape of their forest world.*



For the Mbuti people of the Ituri forest of north-eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo, a nomadic hunter-gatherer society, the forest is sacred. It is the source of their existence – their god, parent and sanctuary. The Mbuti are bamiki bandura, “children of the forest”, enveloped from birth in a rich symbolic tradition that stresses the supreme value of ndura, or “forestness”. Mbuti speak and sing reverently and lightheartedly about, and to, the forest. They sing “leaf-carrying” and “honey-bee” songs. The most valued are songs without words, sung to awaken the forest and make it rejoice through the beauty of the sound alone. Dances performed for ritual purposes or for pure enjoyment include the mimetic “elephant hunt” and “honey-bee” dances, enacted to attract, and give thanks for, game and food.

The Mbuti use painted barkcloths, prepared by men and painted by women, as ritual dress for festivals, celebrations and rites of passage, including wedding and funeral ceremonies and puberty initiations. Both the painted barkcloth that wraps an Mbuti infant at birth, and the barkcloth tunnel through which young boys are “reborn” during puberty rites, are conceived, like the forest, as a womb (ndu).

Men prepare the barkcloth from the inner bark of about six different species of trees. It is pounded with an ivory or wood mallet which may be incised



with cross-hatch or linear grooves to produce a subtle textured surface. The process yields a supple fibrous canvas of various natural shades of white, tan or reddish brown. Mud immersions produce deep red and black grounds.

Women prepare the dyes and paints from a variety of roots, fruits and leaves which they collect from the forest. The paint is applied with twigs, twine or fingers. The elaborate process of preparing and painting a barkcloth is a social activity, and Mbuti learn how to make barkcloth from an early age.

The Mbuti barkcloth paintings conceptualize their world; they are abstract expressions of the moods and features of the forest. The artists transform signs of the visible (the fractal geometry of trees) and the invisible (folded leaves, subtle modulations of insect sounds) into a unique visual language. The paintings are evidence of the Mbuti perception of the forest as the spiritual and symbolic core of their culture. The artists combine a variety of biomorphic motifs (e.g. butterflies, birds, leopard spots) with geometric patterns that give an impression of motion, sound and shape within the forest landscape: light filtered through trees, buzzing insects, ant trails, tangled vines. Cross-hatched squares, perhaps representing the texture of reptilian skin, are shorthand for turtles, crocodiles or snakes.

Visual “silences” or voids in the patterns are especially valued, consistent with Mbuti concepts of sound and silence. Silence in Mbuti thought does not imply lack of sound – for the forest is always “talking” – but quiet (ekimi), the absence of noise. Noise (akami) is conflict. Sound has spiritual and magical properties. It is integral to the Mbuti world, not only as an acoustic backdrop, but as a means of heightened communication with other people and with the forest itself.

Source: Adapted from V. Drake Moraga. 1996. An eternity of forest – paintings by Mbuti women. Essay and introduction to the exhibition, Berkeley Art Museum, Berkeley, California, USA. Internet document: [www.bampfa.berkeley.edu/exhibits/mbuti/brochure.html](http://www.bampfa.berkeley.edu/exhibits/mbuti/brochure.html)

sakaki had a significant role in the Japanese creation story; gods dug up a 500-branched sakaki tree from the heavenly Mount Kaga; on its upper branches they hung an eight-foot string of 500 jewels, on its middle branches an eight-foot long mirror, and on its lower branches white and blue offerings. The goddess Amaterasu saw her reflection in the mirror hanging from the sakaki and was drawn from her cave, restoring light to the heavens and the earth. Today, in imitation of the myth, mirrors are hung in sakaki trees at Shinto shrines. The sakaki is represented as the sacred central post of the shrine to Amaterasu (Wehner, 2002).

The tradition of the sacred grove, often associated with secrecy and initiation rites, was widespread in many cultures. Groups of trees, or portions of natural or planted forest, were considered to be separate from the rest and untouchable. Many of these groves retain their significance to the present day: the World Heritage List of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) includes several groves and forests recognized for their spiritual as well as ecological values as sacred or holy. Examples include the Central Eastern Rainforest Reserves in Queensland, Australia, containing geographical features considered as sacred by the Aborigines; the Horsh Arz el-Rab (Forest of the Cedars of God) in Lebanon (see Box on p. 50); the forests of Mount Kenya in Kenya, held as holy by the inhabitants; and a sacred grove still used by priests in rice ceremonies in the mountain rice terraces of Luzon, the Philippines.

#### HUMAN IDENTIFICATION AND ABSTRACT FORM

Because of their shape – a central trunk with branches like arms and fingers, bark like skin – trees lend themselves to iden-

tification with the human form, and have frequently been endowed symbolically with anthropomorphic characteristics, leading to a link with fertility symbols in some cultures. In the biblical Song of Songs, the beloved woman was described to be “in stature like the palm tree, its fruit clusters [her] breasts” (7:8-9), and she said, “As the apple tree among the trees of the wood, so is my beloved among the sons. I sat down under his shadow with great delight and his fruit was sweet to my taste” (2:3). In several Greek myths, human maidens or nymphs pursued by gods begged for protection from other deities and were transformed into trees. Daphne was saved from Apollo in this way; she was transformed into the laurel tree, which Apollo then used as his symbol, decorating his lyre with laurel leaves and using them as a crown. Other wood nymphs in the Greek and Roman myths included Leuke or Leuce, the white poplar, beloved of Hades; Philyra, the linden



In one of the best known Greek transformation myths, Daphne was transformed into a laurel tree to escape pursuit by Apollo – as illustrated by Pollaiuolo in this fifteenth century painting

#### Trees and fertility rites

- Among certain nomad tribes in the Near East (e.g. Islamic Republic of Iran), young women sometimes have the image of a tree tattooed on their abdomens to encourage conception.
- In India, women hang red handkerchiefs on certain trees close to wells to conjure away sterility.
- Symbolic “marriages” between humans and trees (the person touches the tree trunk for a period of time, usually a number of hours) have been recorded in the Punjab and Himalaya regions of India, among Sioux Indians in North America and among some sub-Saharan African tribes.
- In southern India, infertile couples sometimes planted the male and female of a tree close together in the hope that this would bring about the birth of a child.
- The frequency with which father trees and mother trees are encountered in legends and popular tales probably led to the concept of the ancestor tree, which has come down through history as the genealogical tree (Chevalier and Gheerbrant, 1982).

tree, who bore the monster Centaur and desired to change into any other form but her human one; and Pitys, a chaste nymph pursued by the wood god Pan, who was turned into the fir or black pine. The story of Baucis and Philemon is another interesting tree-transformation myth. This poor husband and wife were the only people in their village to offer hospitality to two gods visiting the earth disguised as beggars; as a reward they were not only showered with riches, but were given an afterlife together as a linden and an oak growing from the same root. The identification of trees with the human body is also seen in yoga, the Hindu system of meditation. In the tree pose, for example, the weight of the body is kept low to develop a feeling of being pulled down into the ground, while the arms are outstretched like branches. This pose is intended to instil a feeling of rootedness and upward growth.

Most of these myths and practices point to an underlying identification of trees as receptacles for spirits or souls, a belief common in many cultures. In Australia, western Warlpiri Aborigines believe that souls accumulate in trees and wait for a likely woman to pass by so that they

In ancient Egyptian mythology, the gods sat upon a sycamore fig, *Ficus sycamorus*, and twin sycamore figs stood at the eastern gate of heaven



can jump out and be born (Warnayaka Art Centre, 2001).

Tall, resistant trees have frequently been identified with courageous or righteous humans; many examples are found in Biblical and Koranic texts. A contemporary example is a service award given in South Africa today, the Order of the Baobab. The great baobab, with its broad, strong protruding root system, holds magical and symbolic value for African indigenous people and is a common meeting place and safe haven in traditional African societies. The award recognizes the qualities of vitality and endurance that the tree embodies (J. Tieguhong, personal communication, 2003). Trees furthermore came to stand as signifiers for objects, abstract concepts or actions resembling them in structure (branching, having a central

axis) or stature. Thus in many languages they serve as metaphors in a variety of expressions (family, or genealogical, trees; cerebral trunk, branches of knowledge, etc.). They may have served as an origin of the notion of systems (circulation; interconnection; hierarchy) (Harrison, 1992) – a good example is the “tree of veins” devised by Leonardo da Vinci in the fifteenth century as an explanation for the human circulatory system. It could be said that trees provided structures for thought itself.

#### **TREE OF LIFE (OR WORLD TREE)**

The tree of life is a widespread motif in many myths and folktales around the world, by which cultures sought to understand the human and profane condition in relation to the divine and sacred realm. Many legends speak of a tree of life, which grows above the



The great baobab, with its broad, strong protruding root system, has magical and symbolic value in Africa

ground and gives life to gods or humans, or of a world tree, which is often linked with a “centre” of the earth. It is probably the most ancient human myth, and is possibly a universal one.

In ancient Egyptian mythology, the gods sat upon a sycamore fig, *Ficus sycomorus*, whose fruits were held to feed the blessed. According to the Egyptian Book of the Dead, twin sycamore figs stood at the eastern gate of heaven from which the sun god, Re, emerged each morning. This tree was also regarded as a manifestation of the goddesses Nut, Isis and especially Hathor, the “Lady of the Sycamore”. *Ficus sycomorus* was often planted near tombs, and being buried in a coffin made of the wood from this tree was believed to return the deceased to the womb of the mother tree goddess.

The tree of life was often taken to be the centre of the world. It was seen to bind together heaven and earth, representing a vital connection between the worlds of the gods and humans. Oracles, judgements or other prophetic activities are performed at its base. In some traditions, the tree was planted at the centre of the world and was seen as the source of terrestrial fertility and life. Human life was believed to be descended from it; its fruit was believed to confer everlasting life; and if it were cut down, it was thought that all fecundity would cease. The tree of life occurred commonly in quest romances in which the hero sought the tree and needed to overcome a variety of obstacles on his way.

The Tree of Life of the Cabbala (the esoteric medieval doctrine of Jewish mysticism) had ten branches, the Sephiroth, representing the ten attributes or emanations by means of which the infinite and divine would enter into relation with the finite. The branched candlestick known as the menorah, one of the most ancient symbols of Judaism, had links to the tree of life. The form

A tree of life that binds together heaven and earth is a concept familiar to many cultures (shown, a Celtic symbol)



of the menorah was reputedly given to Moses by God (Exodus 25:31-37); it was to have six branches, with cups shaped like almond flowers with buds and blossoms. In Proverbs 3:18, wisdom

### Tree alphabets

Evidence from the ancient Celtic civilization of northern Europe suggests signs of an association between trees and writing. The 25 characters of the Celtic alphabet (*ogham*), used for stone and wood inscriptions, were named for a group of 20 sacred trees and plants (also called *ogham*). The 13 months of the Celtic calendar were also named for some of these trees.

One of the sources for the list of the sacred trees and the Celtic “tree alphabet” was a body of poems related to the *Cad Goddeu* (“battle of the trees”) legend, in which trees mobilized themselves and attacked an enemy (Graves, 1966).

The trees in the “alphabetic order” of the Celts have been identified by Graves and others as the following (several of which are not actually trees): silver birch (*Betula pendula*); rowan or mountain ash (*Sorbus aucuparia*); common alder (*Alnus glutinosa*); willow (*Salix alba* or *Salix fragilis*); ash (*Fraxinus excelsior*); hawthorn (*Crataegus monogyna* or *Crataegus laevigata*); oak (*Quercus robur*); holly (*Ilex aquifolium*) or possibly the holly oak (*Quercus ilex*); hazel (*Corylus avellana*); European crabapple (*Malus sylvestris*); grape (*Vitis vinifera*); common ivy (*Hedera helix*); large grass reed (*Phragmites australis*); blackthorn (*Prunus*

*spinosa*); common elder (*Sambucus nigra*); silver fir (*Abies alba*); furze or gorse (*Ulex europaeus*); heather (*Calluna vulgaris*); aspen (*Populus tremula*); and yew (*Taxus baccata*). The hypothesis presented by Graves concerning the order of the trees is that it was based on an order of botanical events in a particular geographical area (i.e. when they put out leaves in the spring or when they flowered, for example).

The letters of the Old Irish alphabet were simple horizontal or oblique lines, similar to runes. They were easy to inscribe and were originally carved into wood. Indeed, the Irish words for “wood” and “science” have almost the same sound (Clark, 1995, 2001). Beech (*Fagus* spp.) tablets served as early writing surfaces (the straight runic letters were carved into them), and bark in very thin sheets was used to make early books (Rocray, 1997). Indeed the word for “book” may be etymologically related to “beech” in English and some other languages in the Indo-European family.

In Norse mythology,  
the giant ash tree  
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and sheltered all the  
worlds



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is said to be “a tree of life to them who take hold of her”.

The so-called world tree, or cosmic tree, is another tree of life symbol. There was a world tree in the Garden of Eden of the book of Genesis, and this tradition is common to Judaism, Christianity and Islam. Cosmic tree myths are known in Haitian, Finnish, Lithuanian, Hungarian, Indian, Chinese, Japanese, Siberian and northern Asian Shamanic folklore. Ancient peoples, particularly Hindus and Scandinavians, thought of the world as a divine tree growing from a single seed sown in space; sometimes it was inverted (Hall, 1999). The ancient Greeks, Persians, Chaldeans and Japanese had legends describing the axle tree upon

which the earth revolves. The medieval Cabbalists represented creation as a tree with its roots in the reality of spirit (the sky) and its branches upon the earth (material reality). The image of the inverted tree is also seen in inverted postures in yoga, where the feet were conceived as the receptacles of sunlight and other “heavenly” energies which were to be transformed as the tree transforms light into other energies in photosynthesis (de Souza, 1991).

However, more generally the cosmic tree was believed to have its roots in the underworld and its branches in the highest empyrean above. It was always considered as both natural and supernatural, that is, belonging to the earth

but somehow not of the earth itself. To come into contact with this tree, or to live in or on it, usually always meant regeneration or rebirth for an individual. In many epic stories the hero would die upon such a tree and be regenerated. There is also a notion that the world tree told the story of the ancestors, and to recognize the tree was to recognize one’s place as a human being. The wood of this tree was commonly held to be the universal matter. In Greek, the word *hylé* designates both “wood” and “matter”, “first substance” (Pochoy, 2001).

In Norse mythology, Yggdrasil (“The Terrible One’s Horse”), also called the World Tree, was the giant ash tree that linked and sheltered all the worlds.

Beneath the three roots the realms of Asgard, Jotunheim and Niflheim were located. Three wells were said to lie at its base: the Well of Wisdom (Mímisbrunnr), guarded by Mimir; the Well of Fate (Urdarbrunnr), guarded by the Norns; and the Hvergelmir (Roaring Kettle), the source of many rivers. Four deer, representing the four winds, were said to run across the branches of the tree and eat the buds. Other inhabitants of the tree included the squirrel Ratatosk (“swift teeth”), a notorious gossip, and Vidofnir (“tree snake”), the golden cock perched on the topmost bough. The roots were said to be gnawed upon by Nidhogg and other serpents. The legend held that on the day of Ragnarok, the fire giant Surt would set the tree on fire. Other names for Yggdrasil include Hoddmimir’s Wood, Laerad and Odin’s Horse. The Norse myths recount that the god Odin was sacrificed, died and hung upon Yggdrasil. He was regenerated and came back to life blind, but endowed by the gods with the gift of divine sight.

In the Yggdrasil myth, the ash tree may have been taken as the symbol for the world axis because ash wood is particularly resistant while at the same time very supple, bending before it snaps. Certain pre-Bronze Age societies made their utensils and weapons from fire-hardened ash rods. In the *Iliad*, Homer’s epic poem recounting the probably twelfth or thirteenth century BC war between the city of Troy and the attacking Greeks, for example, the same Greek word means both “ash” and “lance”.

#### CONCLUSION

Although veneration of certain trees or groves may persist in local traditions, tree worship has for the most part disappeared from the modern world. However, the symbols that remain in language, lore and culture serve as reminders of the

rich relationship between human thought and the forest world. Modern concerns with conserving the forests are perhaps a natural extension of the logic of ancient tree rites. Yesterday’s sacred grove is today a biosphere reserve, a natural heritage site or protected area. Delving into the symbolic realm can often help to explain the links between ancient value systems and modern practices.



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