

MATERIALIZING CULTURE

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The Social Life of Trees

*Anthropological Perspectives on
Tree Symbolism*

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Trees of Knowledge of Self and Other in Culture: On Models for the Moral Imagination

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Prowling around Trees in Search of Enlightenment

In the sacred grove there grew a certain tree round which at any time of day and far into the night a grim figure might be seen to prowl.

The Golden Bough (Chapter 1:1)

Introduction

It is not hard for me to commune with trees. In my years of ethnographic fieldwork in Equatorial and Tropical Africa and on the Cantabrian, sea-facing slope of northern Spain I have lived among people who live in or next to forests upon which they have long, in important part, depended both economically and symbolically. And I have done some prowling with them around their salient trees. These are people who, from this traffic, have become quite knowledgeable about trees. And they have been, almost always, very happy to talk about that subject and impart their knowledge. If I had worked exclusively among Eskimo or Aymara I could hardly have contributed to this book. Or any chapter I might have written would surely have been a more austere one. Ecological circumstances alter cultural cases. The cultural icons of such barrens and steppe people are necessarily quite different. I have worked among forest-dwellers and forest margin people. In this chapter I will be interested in the use they make of this landscape and of these trees to aid and abet their understanding and

as repositories of their knowledge . . . particularly their knowledge about social relationships.

Arboreality and the Moral Imagination

Trees have been fruitful leitmotifs in my fieldwork in Africa and Europe, and they are powerful images, both imitative and contagious, which do significant work in the local imagination. And it is some of that work that I would like to attend to here. True to this ethnographic presence and beyond the engagement with the writing of this chapter I could hardly escape making trees a leitmotif in my ethnography generally.

About the place of trees in culture, of course, we Indo-Euro-Americans know quite a lot. At the very least Frazer's *Golden Bough* informs us, in a compendious way, of the centrality of trees in this great family of cultures. We recall how he began his massive associationist *oeuvre*, whose own leitmotif was the 'struggle for succession' in culture, in the fateful happenings at Diana's oak grove at Nemi. Thereafter the reader is led on to hundreds of pages on nature worship, vegetation rites and, in particular, tree spirits and tree worship in Europe. To be sure Europeans already knew from the Paradise Myth that the knowledge of good and evil, of yea and nay, of the pleasures and peditions of being fruitful and multiplying, of struggling and falling or struggling and succeeding are fruits of the tree, the tree of knowledge, the bearer of bitter fruit AND the abode of the serpent. We also know from Frazer's *Golden Bough* the manifold polyvalence of trees. In the beginning of that massive *opus* the tree harbours something akin to the political power of perpetuity, and determined but mortal men who pretend to the priesthood of that power must ceaselessly prowl around the dubiously fruitful tree of life in defence of it until autumnal foreshortening of nutrient flow and the falling leaves of time bring about the recurring tragic replacement.

Those trees in whose dim shadow

The ghastly priest does reign,

The priest who slew the slayer,

And shall himself be slain!

Macaulay

But hundreds of pages later our imaginations are captured by less sombre scenes, in relation particularly to spring ceremonies, with their Maypole

or May Tree around which men and women dance to guarantee the perpetuity that lies in the annual renewal of fertility of nature and human kind alike.

These figures, whether Diana's hunter king, circling around, and in some sense gaining his power from the fruitful overarching tree, with its eternal golden bough – whose immortality contrasts so ominously with his own mortality – or these May Tree dancers, are but versions of the archetypal figure, who beneath or in close association with a tree of enlightenment or re-invigoration attains to special power and insight: Augustine, who in his long agony of indecision flings himself down under a fig tree in his garden and is finally and fully converted (*Confessions*, Book VIII. 12). Newton, whose powerful mind is, the myth has it, under an apple tree, inspired to convert, by force of gravity, a God-given but disorderly universe into an orderly one. Not to mention, outside the Western tradition, what came to Bodhisattva, the Buddha, under the Bo tree.¹ Of course, anthropologists do not have to go so far afield. For Victor Turner it was the *mindyi* tree, we remember, that inspired him to one of his most insightful analyses and one of the most basic formulating statements of his symbolic theory.² Men contemplate trees and shake them that their fruits may fall to their profit, but men and women, in the presence of trees, find their imaginations shaken into new understandings of their selves and the universe and of the relation between the two. What power in and over the imagination trees have seemed to have, and what an apt leitmotif they have contributed to orienting thought in culture. Trees of knowledge, indeed!

Frazer was fertile in analogy and sustained reiterative allusions, and trees were among the most sustained and allusive of analogies in his *oeuvre*. But analogies and allusions to what purpose? For purposes mainly, in a Victorian age, we may hazard, of exciting the 'moral imagination' by images more evocative of human attitudes and the verities of the human condition than Victorian platitudes might allow. It is that Darwinian image of man not only as 'the slayer who must be slain' if human life is to live on, but who must also and otherwise, in a plethora of apparently irrational rites, many of them involving prowling around trees, rejuvenate himself and the world. Stanley Hyman (1959: 429) – though his universalism will give any anthropologist pause – says it well:

The Golden Bough is not primarily anthropology, if it ever was, but a great imaginative vision of the human condition. Frazer had a genuine

sense of the bloodshed and horror behind the gaiety of a maypole or a London-bridge-is-falling-down game, akin to Darwin's sense of the war to the death behind the face of nature bright with gladness, or Marx's apocalyptic vision of capital reeking from every pore with blood and dirt, or Freud's consciousness of the murderer and the incestuous wish. The key image of *The Golden Bough*, the king who slays the slayer, and must himself be slain, corresponds to some universal principle we recognize in life.

That comes pretty close to the taproot of my argument. For it seems to me that the best ethnography is an ethnography of the role of the imagination in culture. It is an ethnography attuned to the imaginative visions of the human condition present in those we work among. And it is attuned to those images that are central and recurrent, as in meditation, speculation and argument cultures ponder their conditions and their ultimate circumstances. It is attuned to a culture's sustained analogies that give order to and account for disorder in condition and circumstance. It is an ethnography that seeks to know and account for the power certain images have to capture the imagination in a particular culture at a particular time . . . say the force of self-aggrandizing images of individualist combat and entrepreneurial survival, the Social Darwinism, found among privatised Western Euro-Americans living under late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century industrial capitalism and commodity fetishism.

In any event, the ethnography of the imagination is an ethnography sympathetic to the attractive, sym-pathic lines of force produced by central images. As the Scottish Enlightenment, to whom Frazer was no stranger, might tell us, there is all of a 'moral philosophy' – the rubric under which the fledgling social sciences first trafficked, we recall – in the study of such lines of force. And the imagination, in so far as it is powerful, is always a 'moral imagination', capturing other imaginations by some vision or other and evoking associations in the interest of a certain state of things, certain forms of society and states of personal character . . . prowling around up to no good, or up to some good. Here is Hyman (1959: x) again introducing the artfulness and imaginative power of the great nineteenth-century and turn-of-the-century social thinkers, Darwin, Marx, Freud and Frazer:

I believe their books to be art, but I believe art itself to have an ethical as well as an aesthetic dimension, in that it is the work of the moral imagination, imposing order and form on disorderly and anarchic

experience. That this vision of order and form is primarily metaphoric makes it no less real, since lines of force then radiate out from the work of art to order and re-order the world around.

So, thus, we are brought closer to the issue and essence of Enlightenment. And we are brought to the seed at the very centre of powerful imaginations; pithy metaphors of power! To give us more comparative and ethnographic perspective I invite the reader's company deeper into the forest . . . or rather into the particular forests of my fieldwork!

Treating the Fugitive Moral Imagination – Trees of Civic Life and Death

The distance the modern human and social sciences have travelled from the 'moral philosophy' of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment, the Scottish and those associated with it, is debatable. It is clear that these Enlightenmenters were, like these modern sciences, intensely interested in the springs of human nature and, faced with the declining importance of the sacred and sacred sanctions, also intensely interested in what reason, substituting for dogma, might say about right conduct. But it is not clear that one can study these matters in any century independent of moral considerations. For example, in anthropological ethnography there are choices that must be made by the ethnographer that have moral implications, in so far as (1) one must inevitably select in one's own narrative what events and voices to represent, of which it can be asked are they right or wrong, beneficial or detrimental choices as regards local interests; and (2) the ethnography is never *sui generis*, but implied or suggested comparisons may always be present, which may imply moral judgement or animate the invidious. And there are local narratives, many if not all moral in tone and intention, of which the ethnographer must be aware and whose moral implications the ethnographer must assess. But let me root this discussion in fieldwork in Equatorial Africa (among Fang) and Northern Spain (among Asturians). I want to show in these ethnographic milieux how trees, by certain associative processes, can excite the moral imagination concerning the health or disease of corporate bodies, bodies corporeal and bodies politic as it were, and are thus powerful or power-associated imaginative devices.

If it may be thought, incidentally, that this ethnographic experience is of a very unique kind one might consider Gillian Feeley Harnick's (1991) *A Green Estate: Restoring Independence in Madagascar*, in which

arboreal metaphors are organising to her argument, as they are organising to the Sakalava in their planting of themselves and their flourishing or root-starved genealogies in history and in the world.³ Elsewhere, the focus in central Africa on slash-and-burn agriculture, *ciemene*, where trees are sites of manly confirmation and cultural affirmation, has been a consistent theme in ethnography, from the pioneering 1930s work of Audrey Richards, for example, *Land, Labour and Diet in Northern Rhodesia* (Richards 1939), to the contemporary historical ethnography *Cutting Down Trees: Gender Nutrition and Agricultural Change in the Northern Province of Zambia, 1890–1990* (Moore and Vaughan 1994). Or one might consider, from a more practical point of view if one is desired, the long-term commitment to tree-planting, since the founding of the Arbor Day Movement in the 1870s, in the United States, in the Prairie and Great Plains States principally. There has been a recent upswing in this interest in tree-planting in the United States, Europe, indeed the world, as a counter to the destruction of the tropical rain-forests and the accumulation of greenhouse gases. Also plentiful is the literature on deforestation and reforestation, particularly in the Third World, in which the symbolism of trees and a culture's engagement with them is of focal consideration for the anthropologist as ethnographer (Feeley Harnick 1991; Sahlins 1994) or the anthropologist as developer (Murray 1987).

In any event, in both the cultural milieux I know best, Africa and Asturias, tree symbolism is of the greatest importance, and trees or parts of them are predicated upon individuals and upon groups to considerable, usually salutary, effect. Ecologically speaking, this is not surprising. Equatorial West Africa is one of the most richly forested parts of the earth; and the Cantabrian slope of Spain, in contrast to most of the Iberian Peninsula, was, until not too long ago, densely populated with oak and beech and ash forests . . . from which came the timbers of the Great Armada, just to evoke a symbolically powerful historical event in English-speaking lands.

A Tree Culture of the Equatorial Forest

Since I have written extensive ethnography on the place of trees in the religious imagination of Fang, I shall only summarise and point up those materials here. I shall have a little more to say about trees in Asturian culture. The index entries for 'trees' and for 'forest' in the ethnography of Bwiti run to easily several hundred items (Fernandez 1982: 701–2; 727–8), with particular attention paid to the way that

the religion of Bwiti uses the many different tree varieties of the Equatorial forest to structure their Chapel and give it meaningful architectonic form. For the pillar of the Chapel, the *akon aba*, sometimes called 'the tree of heaven and earth', or 'the tree of life and death', is necessarily made of red *padouk* in order to symbolise the path of life and death that the Banzie, the adepts of Bwiti, travel during their initiation and during their subsequent life in Bwiti. But the supporting columns of the Chapel are made of different trees entirely, as are the beams, each with its particular symbolic weighting and particular contribution to the overarching architectonic. In the initiation into Bwiti, described extensively in Chapter 18, more than a dozen different trees are exploited for their sap, their bark, and particularly their leaves in order to minister in powerful potions, salves and unguents, and burnt offerings to the initiate, and thereby, by association, transform his or her bad body (*nyol abe*) and bring him or her as a new and purified, 'a goodbodied', member into the religion.

As far as direct religious doctrine is concerned, the Saviour figure, 'He Who Sees God' (*Eyene zame*), is conceived as having been crucified upon the *otunga* tree . . . a tree particularly strong in associations for Fang (Figure 4.1).⁴ It is not surprising that with this dependence upon tree symbolism (in truth, of course, the Fang themselves are highly dependent economically *as well as symbolically* upon the equatorial forest in which they live) that the Bwiti religion calls itself and is called by other Fang a 'Religion of the Forest' or a 'Religion of Trees' (Fernandez 1982: 472). No ethnography of the Fang religious imagination – a powerful imagination, as I tried to demonstrate in too many pages – can be adequately written without giving careful consideration to the precise Fang knowledge of the rich diversity and great variety of uses of the Equatorial forest, and the potential ways that diversity can be both good to think with and a good by which to order behaviour.

Asturias: The Moral Agency of the Oak

Let me move on to present ethnographic work in Asturias, a heavily forested Celtic landscape where an ethnographer can spend hours with countrymen talking about trees. Let me focus on the oak (*Quercus hispanica*, or *Quercus robur*) and speak to the imaginative power of the oak in Asturian culture. I will single out this tree because it is the emblem of identity of the provincial capital and its residents, who are nicknamed *carbaxon* (Great Oaks). For more than a century, as can be detailed, the oak has been a periodic symbolic focus of the identity

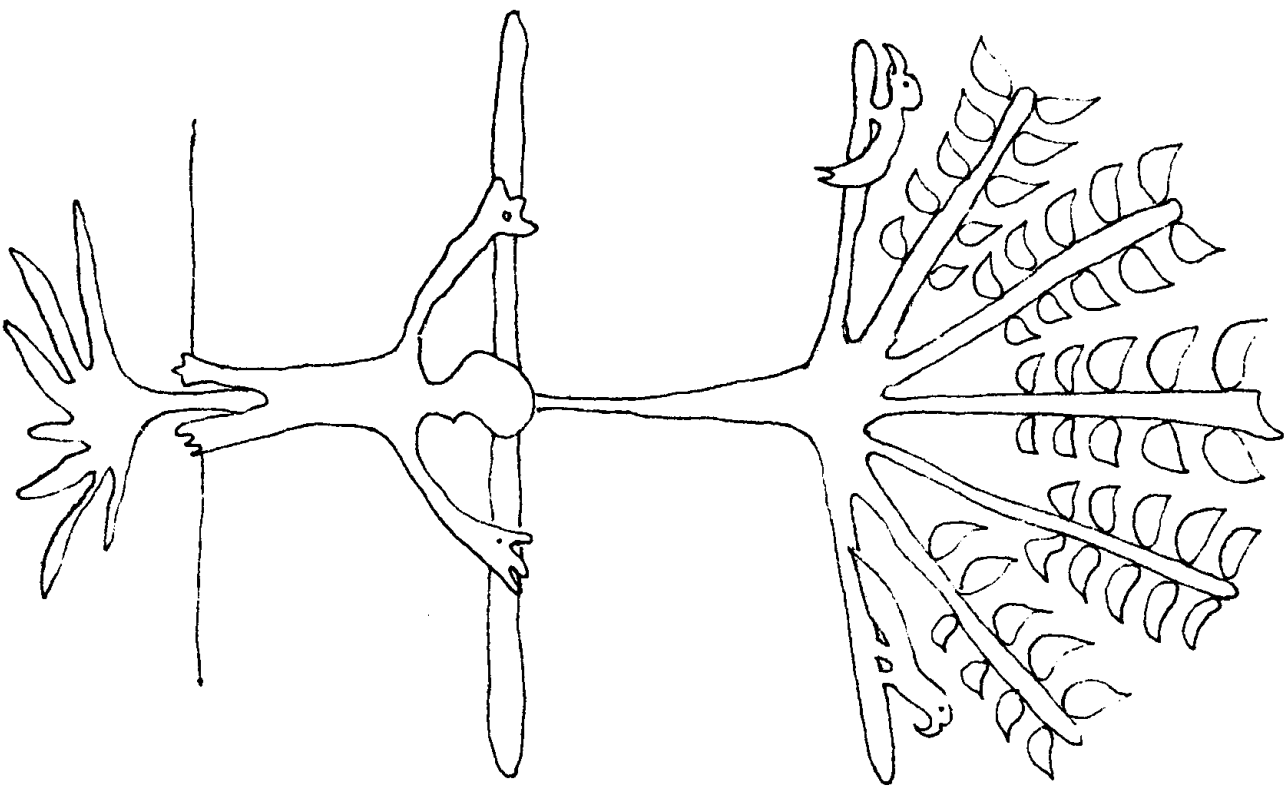


Figure 4.1 The 'Otunga Tree' of Bwiti on Which 'He Who Sees God' was Hung.

preoccupations of the inhabitants. It is also a tree imaginatively provocative in a general way to Asturians as both a tree of corporate Life and a vehicle of corporate Death.⁵ It might be expressed analogically, as in fact it is expressed in the neighbouring region of Galicia, that both men and trees derive their sustenance and character from being 'planted' in local geography.⁶

In any event, no more than in the case of the African work can I give in this place a full ethnographic account of how trees and forest *are* imaginatively provocative in the province. But one can suggest what an adequate ethnographic account of these powerful local images would involve. It would involve some prehistorical and historical references, the place of the Oak among the ancient Indo-Europeans, for example, whose 'arboreal orientation' has been clearly shown.⁷ It would include references in Strabo's geography to the surprising dependence, from the classical view, of the pre-romanised Asturian tribes on the oak and other nut trees and upon their dry fruits that gave nuts, acorn and beech nut flour, and walnut oil. It would include the place of the oak among other northern Iberian tribes such as the Basques, where it continues to be the central symbolic tree of the Basque nation at Guernika.

There is an instructive identifying contrast here to the rest of Iberia, where the olive and the vine and their oils and fermentations predominate, in contrast to the Asturian acorn and apple and the nutmeals, nut oils and, of course, local cider; this is to say nothing of the symbolic geography dividing butter-users and olive oil-users in Iberia! Such an ethnography would involve a review of all the Asturian place-names in which trees are referenced, particularly the oak.⁸ It would involve the many proverbs and maxims and tales, in which trees of various kinds constitute the metaphoric expression, the objective correlatives, of the proverbial wisdom conveyed.⁹ It would involve, once again by reference to folk and religious lore, an examination of the sacrosanct place of beech, oak and chestnut groves, and tree and forest spirits, in Asturian folklore. It would involve an account of the powerful place in the local parochial imagination of the parish forests, as a source of arboreal fruits of all kinds, dry and fleshy, and the struggle, since time immemorial, over the local proprietorial rights over the forest (or at least over specific trees), as between the individual family and the community, and since the re-organisation of the Spanish State in the early nineteenth century, between the village and parish community, on the one hand, and the municipality, on the other.¹⁰ All these historical and cultural associations are potentially at work in variable

ways in the provincial imaginations where trees and forests are concerned, imparting a special quality, for example, to the arguments and actions of the contemporary ecological movement and its strenuous defence of the few remaining oak and beech forests in the Province.¹¹

So the ethnography of the imaginative power of the Asturian oak, the *Carbayu*, which would be an ethnography of its *potential* associations, is no easy descriptive task, but involves a complex prehistorical, botanical, folkloric, socio-cultural and political economic consultation. In the case of the Great Oak of Oviedo (Figure 4.2) for well over a hundred years now the replacement of that ancient tree, which had stood for centuries along the main thoroughfare of the town, the Calle Uria, has been a recurrent issue in civic life. After long debate, and singular and continuous public protest, the Municipal Council of Oviedo in 1879, in view of the evident increasingly decrepit state of the tree and of the need to widen out the main street, agreed to cut the old tree down. This caused much lamentation and an outpouring of reactive prose and verse in the local press.¹² It was an act very provocative to the moral imagination. But the memory of the tree did not die, nor the offence at its removal. Finally in 1949 the Municipal Government, in an act of unusual corporate memory and of civic time-binding, and in recognition of the original offence to the citizen's identity, placed a commemorative plaque at the spot: 'Here stood for centuries the Great Oak (*Carbayon*), cut down on the 11th of October of 1879, symbolic tree of this city. The Municipal Government agreed on the 14th of March of 1949 to place this plaque to perpetuate its memory.'

But the plaque still did not yet suffice, and the next year a new young oak was planted nearby in a side yard of the Opera House. In the increasing pollution of Oviedo's inner city this tree and several successors never really flourished, which occasioned comment in the press and the usual banter by taxi drivers and residents about the weakness, by association, of the municipal character and municipal economic health, the moral stature and well-being of the town and its citizens being read reflectively in the declining well-being of the local oak. The present planting seems to be flourishing, incidentally, in contrast to the diminished prospects that Oviedo and Asturias, along with the other north-western Coastal Provinces of Spain, have of entering robustly into European-wide competition in the EEC in the 1990s.

That the character and, in some way, the fate of a European city should be read in the vicissitudes of a succession of oak trees is nothing



Figure 4.2 The 'Great Oak' (*Carbayon*) of Oviedo (from *Gran Enciclopedia Asturiana*, Vol. 4, p. 67).

