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 I: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 perditions of being fruitful and multiplying, of struggling and failing 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 fore-shortening 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!

Macauley

But hundred 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 *mudyi* 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 imagin-ations 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!

Treeing 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 Enlightenments, the Scottish and those associated with it, is debatable. It is clear that these Enlightenments 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, *citemene*, 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 consider-able, 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 Fang religious imagination, as I tried to demonstrate in too many pages – 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 *carbayon* (Great Oaks). For more than a century, as can be detailed, the oak has been a periodic symbolic focus of the identity
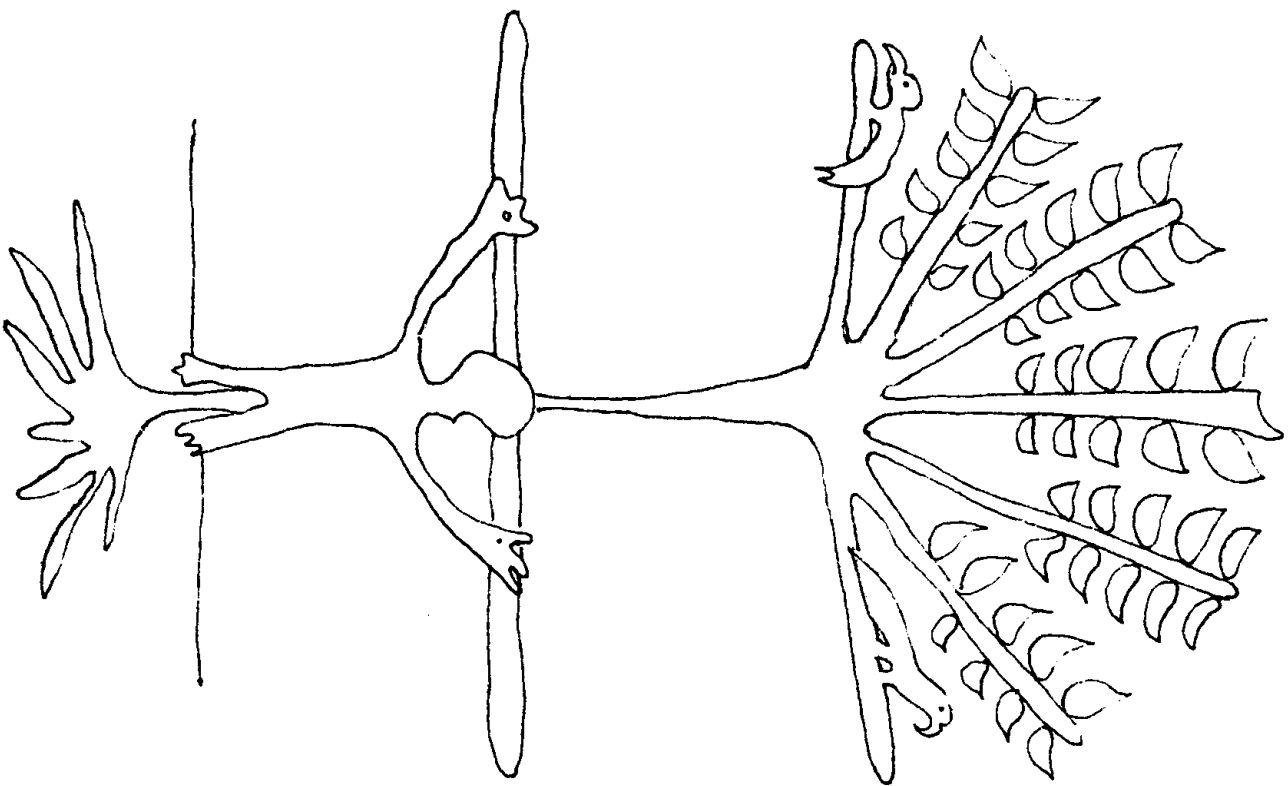
Figure 4.1 The 'Otunga Tree' of Bwiti on Which 'He Who Sees God' was Hung.

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 *Carbayo*, which would be an ethnography of its *potent*-ial 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).

new to our knowledge or to our imaginations. If it is not enough to recall Strabo's observations on the dependency of the ancient pre-Roman Asturians on the oak and upon acorn flour, we know from Frazer (1958, Chapters 9 and 10), and Hubert (1932) the place of the oak in the European religious imagination. As Frazer (1958: 127) says, 'the oak-worship of the Celtic Druids is familiar to every one, and their old word for sanctuary seems to be identical in origin and meaning with the Latin *nemus*, a grove or wooded glade which still survives in the name of Nemi'. The tree around which the fated priest prowled was an oak, after all. But it was not only the Celts. Oak worship was especially powerful among the Germans. And Frazer (1958: 127), as so frequently in *The Golden Bough*, provokes our imagination, in this case our imaginative comprehension, of the identification between tree and humans, with the following item:

How serious the worship was in former times may be gathered from the ferocious penalty appointed by the old German laws for such as dared to peel the bark of a standing tree. The culprit's navel was to be cut out and nailed to a part of the tree which he had peeled and he was to be driven round and round the tree until all his guts were wound around its trunk. The intention of the punishment clearly was to was to replace the dead bark by a living substitute; it was a life for a life, the life of a man for the life of a tree.

In relation to this particular instance of tree-city identification I report from Asturias, Frazer gives us the Roman example of the sacred 'fig tree of Romulus'.[13] As regards Hubert's (1932) work on the Celts, though he questions the frequent derivation of the priestly name 'druids' from the Celtic name of the oak (thus 'priests of the Oak'), he argues that they are closely attached to the cult of the oak 'from which they collect mistletoe and eat acorns to acquire divinatory powers' (Hubert 1932: 276, my translation).

It would be useful, perhaps, to exercise Frazerian powers of comparison between these two cases, African and Asturian, concerning the imaginative presence of trees. I would contrast the corporeal efficacy of tree *product* in the first case, the African, and the social efficacy of tree *presence* in the second, the Asturian. For the product of trees, saps, the powder of wood or leaves, is used efficaciously to bring about changes of state and vital flow, to encourage more adequate growth or inhibit excessive, in afflicted living bodies in the first instance; while in the second the vitality and character of the tree itself is taken as a

sign of social identity, that is, of social character and vitality. Asturians do not now use the laying on or imbibing of oak products for sustenance or healing, though they once did. Indeed in ancient Asturian times the acorn was a principal food stuff. And here, of course, we recognise the inevitable change over historical time of the meaning of these images as a consequence of changing polities and changing economies. In any event, Fang at the time of research did not primarily think of trees as symbols of the body social, though certain trees were thought to stand for what their various religious societies were all about. And Asturians did not regard the oak as a source of food or of medicinal products. The comparison is thus not a perfect parallel. Indeed, while the Asturians no longer use tree products to treat affliction symbolically, the healthy or afflicted nature of trees can register health and affliction, order and disorder, in the body social.

The Great Tree of Being: Humankind's Place in the Natural Order Imagined

One main thing the Scottish moral philosophers were interested in understanding, beside human understanding itself, was, as the titles of some of their works indicate, 'man's place in nature', and how human understanding worked in its natural and social context to effect that 'placement'. For the most part, these 'moral philosophers' were convinced that man was a social creature and a creature whose understanding was fundamentally influenced by the sentiments and passions of his life in society. This is to say, by virtue of man's social nature and the social context of its operation, they doubted that there was any understanding that was not, in some respects, an exercise, covert or overt, in the passionate processes, processes of categorical inclusion or exclusion of groups. Which is to say that reason is an exercise always influenced by the virtuous or invidious placement of oneself or one's group in relationship to others. Indeed for Hume the efficacy of reason, the original influence and conviction it obtains, rests on the imagination, that is upon the 'passionate imaginings' and 'passionate placements' which undergird it. 'Reason', as he says in *The Treatise*, his youthful and most emphatic work on the subject, 'is and ought to be the slave of the passions and can never pretend to any other office than to serve and obey them'.[14]

But beyond the problem of placement within a given society was the problem of 'placement' of the varieties of humankind and the varieties of cultures that Western explorations (since the time of

Herodotus perhaps, but much enlarged by the Renaissance and the Age of Exploration) had revealed. The problem of placement as it exaggerated, by an excitement of the imagination, the awareness of strikingly diverse kinds of human beings required some kind of image or 'speculative instrument' of placement. The image or model of choice for the ordering of the various orders of creation of the period was the 'Great Chain of Being' or 'The Great Tree of Being', two related but different notions, as we shall indicate. This was a chain or tree in which the orders of creation were arranged in ever more refined essences approaching the final refinement of divine essence itself. As Margaret Hodgen (1964) has shown in *Early Anthropology of the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Century*, the growing awareness of the variety of uncivilised tribes created 'the problem of savagery', which was the problem of the static or dynamic and the hierarchical or collateral placement of the newly discovered varieties of men (largely imagined from either meagre or inflated explorer's accounts) in relation to each other. The tendency in the earlier centuries had been toward hierarchical and static placement both of the orders of being and of the varieties of savage, barbarous and civilised men. In the nineteenth century, and particularly after Darwin, the tendency, under the influence of the evolutionary idea *and* that of the psychic unity of mankind, was toward dynamic and collateral placement.

For our purposes here, the models by which this orderly placement was achieved are of special interest. For there was a tendency to move from, first, fixed spheres or levels or monads of being – confinement of essence, that is, to its own sphere or level – to, subsequently, ladders or stairways of being, which envisioned progressive refinement or transformation of essence and thus ascent of being, and then to, finally, evolutionary trees, which were quite dynamic and collateral and which linked the kinds of being in their placement in an evolutionary flow of a common sap-like essence from its deposition in the elemental roots to its final disjunctive and radiating fruition out upon the furthest boughs. Logical and natural 'Trees of Being' had occurred quite early in the Renaissance (Figure 4.3); but the truly dynamic, collateral, transformative evolutionary trees, such as the well-known one from Haeckel (Figure 4.4),[15] were mid-to-late nineteenth-century and post-Darwinian in appearance.

These struggles to order nature, and, particularly, to place the varieties of humankind and their cultures (and the appeal to a variety of models and metaphors to obtain that order) must inevitably be of considerable interest to anthropologists, whose work is, one might argue, always at
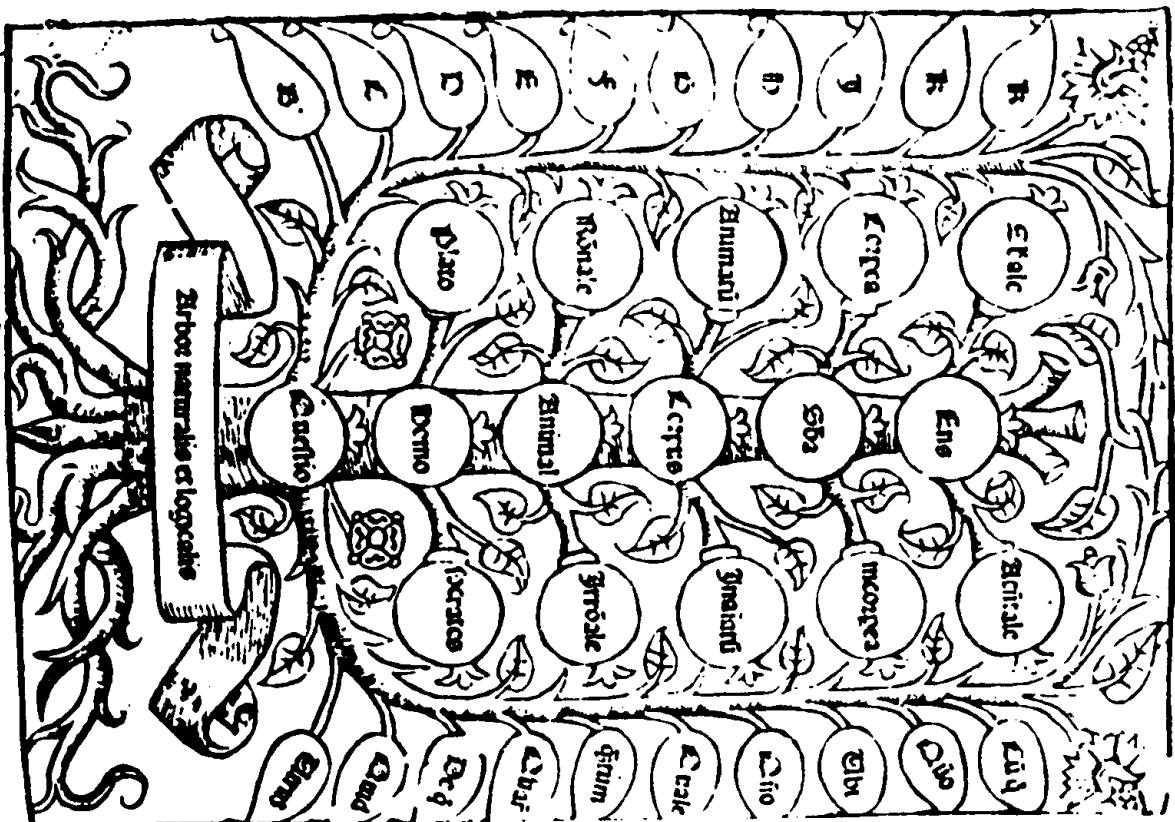
Figure 4.3 Tree Diagram of the Hierarchy of Being (from Raymond Lull, *De nova logica* (1512)). Reprinted in Margaret Hodgen: *Early Anthropology of the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Century*, Philadelphia, 1964, p. 399.
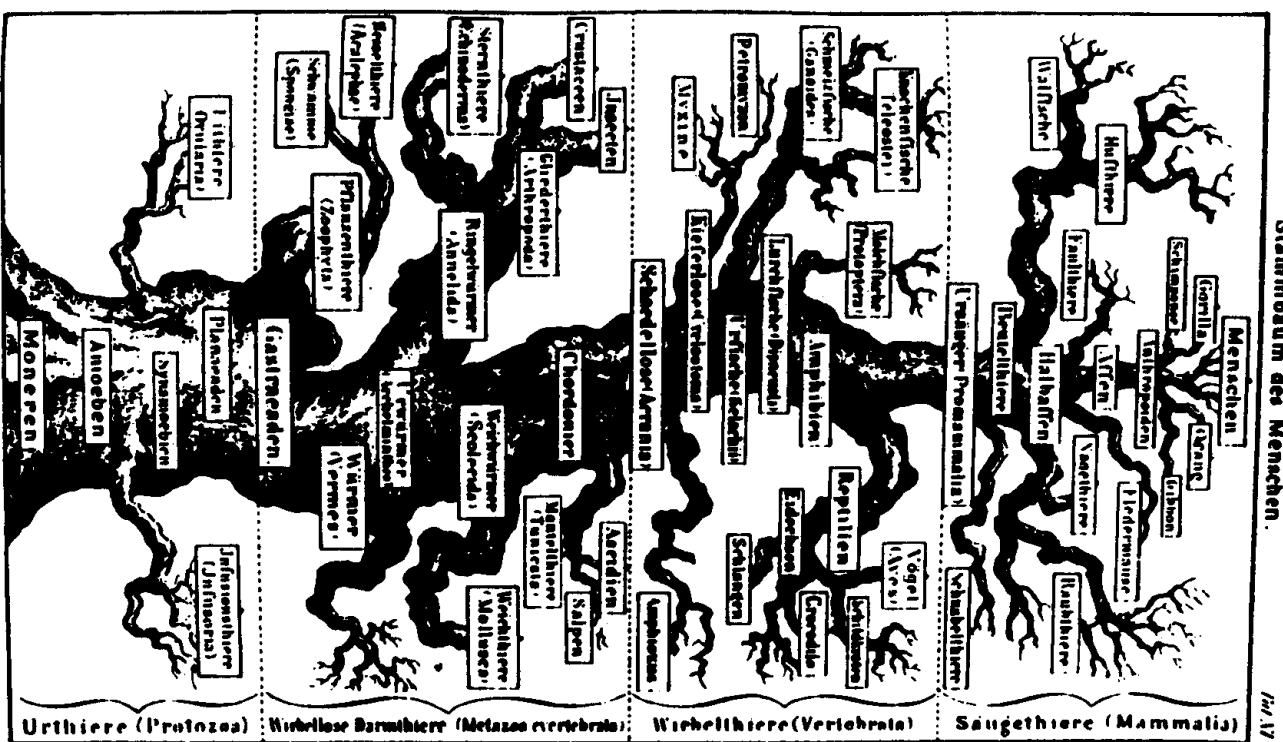
Stammbaum des Menschen.

Figure 4.4 Haeckel's Evolutionary Tree (from Haeckel, 1874).

risk of being implicitly or inadvertently an ordering, and probably, as the eighteenth-century Moral Philosophers would argue, explicitly and necessarily a moral, that is passionate and approbative (or invidious), ordering of human natures. If we are inclined to believe that these ordering devices as ordering devices (without making specific reference to the problem of placement) and the service they offer to our understanding of the order of nature are all passions of the nineteenth century or earlier and, thus, obsolete to our present understanding, we may wish to consider the dependence on tree diagrams in modern transformational linguistics and the metaphor of the deep or root or kernel structure of language, which is transformed by the operational rules of linguistic branching into the abundant crown of the surface structure of language. Of course, much before this transformational model – indeed, since the discovery of the vast Indo-European family of languages of the nineteenth century, in fact – historical linguistics has employed language trees to model the relationships between languages in language families. Indeed, linguists will quickly realise how fundamental the presence of tree metaphors is in their work. As Paul Friedrich (1970: 11) remarks in a footnote to his study of Indo-European tree names, 'the stylistic problems in discussing PIE trees make one aware of the plethora of arboreal metaphors (mainly dead ones) in the literature of linguistics – stems, offshoots, roots, genealogical trees, branching diagrams, derivational trees etc'.

When we speak of genealogical trees (and language families arranged on genealogical trees) in linguistics, we are directly reminded of the presence of the arboreal model, the genealogical tree, in our understanding of the ordering of kin in family structures, whether we are referring to stem families or family stocks (or, in French, *souche*). Radcliffe-Brown and Forde (1950: 15–16) remind us, in reviewing the use of the body and body-appendage metaphor as 'one method of arranging sib-ship', that another way of reckoning degrees of kinship was by such 'stocks', 'a term derived figuratively from the Old German term for stump or trunk' . . . an arboreal reference in short. Of course, though all of these arboreal usages are mostly moribund and convent-ional and powerless, that is not to say they cannot be revived. The sense of the analogy employed is no longer very active in analytic usage either in linguistics or anthropology. Yet it can be demonstrated that contemporary analysis is not entirely freed up from the power and utility of these old analogies, and, in fact, that they are ever-present and potential in thinking.

This has been demonstrated by Lakoff and Turner (1989) for the

organisation of categorical being in terms of 'The Great Chain of Being', an analysis relevant to the antique, once and future image of 'The Tree of Knowledge'. Lakoff and Turner point out that, though the Great Chain is taught in the history of literature as an idea important to the understanding of classical, medieval and renaissance authors and their worldviews (a conceit most prominently resurrected in the eighteenth century), it is by no means of purely historical interest; rather, 'on the contrary, a highly articulated version of it still exists as a contemporary unconscious *cultural model* indispensable to our understanding of ourselves, our world and our language' (Lakoff and Turner 1989: 167). And they show its hierarchical presence in the predicative process by which the more complex appeals to the less complex, the generic appeals to the specific, and the more prestigious appeals to the less for definition. These authors, however, want to do more than argue a pervasive cognitive vector of predication, i.e. of how our understanding makes use of the specific to understand the generic, and the less complex to understand the more. They want to call our attention also to the powerful implications of this commonplace metaphor, that is its implications for not only the dominant-subordinate relationship of being as between inanimate and animate, or merely sensate being on the one hand, and rational/self-conscious being on the other, but also its implications for hierarchical ordering of classes of human beings, the power that one class of humans is able to exert over another. 'The cultural model of the Great Chain concerns not merely attributes and behaviour but also dominance. In this cultural model, higher forms of being dominate lower forms of being by virtue of their higher, that is to say more refined or evolved natures' (Lakoff and Turner 1989: 208). Humans dominate animals and within their category dominate each other, a domination justified by reference to differences in essential being on some Great Chain. Lakoff and Turner note the many consequences for human history and social-political life of a cultural model based on the notion that a hierarchy of increasingly complex and increasingly refined, increasingly dominating essences is of the nature of the cosmos and of its inevitable and correct, if not its happy, order.

Anthropologists may question the universality of these tools of reasoning, these cultural models, but, at least within the Western tradition, we can easily recognise the profound ethical implications (in so far as the question of distributive justice is fundamental to ethics) contained in this metaphor. Had the Moral Philosophers contemplated 'The Great Chain' more intently (it was more explicit in argument in their century than in ours), they might have found that there was a

whole moral philosophy in it. But, of course, our arboreal orientation here reminds us that there are other metaphors of hierarchical human placement and, as we have been suggesting, the tree metaphor, or what might be called, following the Great Chain analogy, the Great Tree of Being, is one of these. Of course there are important differences between a chain or ladder or stairway metaphor and a tree metaphor, whatever hierarchical commonalities they may possess. There is continuity of progression or progressive refinement in the former and disjunctivity, or radial differentiation, in the latter.[16] But in respect to the common-alities, we see that anthropologists are sensitive to the hierarchising implications of the Great Tree version of the Great Chain metaphor. This is evidenced in Ralph Linton's (1959: v) clarification of what kind of a tree he specifically meant in choosing *The Tree of Culture* for the title of his compendium of world cultures:

The title of the book refers not to the familiar evolutionary tree with a single trunk and spreading branches, but to the banyan tree of the tropics. The branches of the banyan tree cross and fuse and send down advent-itious roots, which turn into supporting trunks. Although the banyan tree spreads and grows until it becomes a miniature jungle, it remains a single plant and its various branches are traceable to the parent trunk. So, cultural evolution, in spite of diffusion and borrowing and divergent development, can be traced to its prehistoric origins [. . .] the first part of [this study of cultural evolution] corresponds to the first growth of the banyan tree when it sends forth trunk and branches from its original roots. The second half of the book deals with the growth of civilizations, and the comparison here is with the branches which send down roots which find favorable ground and turn into sturdy independent trunks.

The adventitious re-rootings of the banyan branches evidently suggest a different and, perhaps, for an anthropologist, a more accurate and compelling metaphor than the common tree metaphor with the unidirectionality, hierarchy and finality of its spreading and diversifying fruitions. The banyan tree suggests a circularity, if not a tensile netlike interconnectedness of parts, in human affairs, both as regards cultural evolution and the evolution of understanding, that the normal tree metaphor either conceals or cannot manage to convey. The circular imaginative vision of the human condition, a different order of 'necessary connections' between human variety, than the tree metaphor pure and simple. The web metaphor, which is another powerful

metaphor of the intellectual as well as the moral imagination and one that has been specifically proposed as much preferable to the tree metaphor for social science thinking (Kress 1969) also compensates for the discreteness and saliency and hierarchy of the tree metaphor. It was, incidentally, the metaphor that Frazer himself employed in the concluding parts of his argument with respect to the evolutionary reweaving of the intertwining threads of magic, science and religion.[17]

Another modern alternative to the hierarchical Great Chain or Great Tree of Being, is 'The Tree of Knowledge' itself as employed by Maturana and Varela (1988) in their book of the same name. These authors, contributors to the science of neuropsychology, seek to root human understanding in its cellular base. They wish us to understand the autogenesis or autonomy, or as they call it, autopoiesis, of both the life process itself and of human understanding. To summarise in the very briefest terms, they argue that life is a self-constituting system, and so, by necessity, is our understanding of it. There is, in their argument, a Humean scepticism about the possibility of any absolute certainty beyond what has been temporally constituted as comunally believable. But here we only wish to make clear that their choice of the tree metaphor expresses, for them, both the inter-nurturant unity of all forms of life (in contrast to the Great Ladder or Chain metaphor) and also the final circularity, which is to say self-constitution, of knowledge and understanding. For as the leaves do not fall far from the tree of knowledge, so it, in effect, feeds and renourishes itself. This circularity of self-nurturance is seen in the drawing they choose for their leitmotif (Figure 4.5), as in the 'human is plant' or tree/mind/visual metaphor they have chosen for their cover (Figure 4.6, an adaptation of a painting by Salvador Dalí).

On the Passing Powers of the Imagination and the Landscapes of its Passage

In Potebjna's examples from Slavic folklore, the willow under which a girl passes serves at the same time as her image: the tree and the girl are both co-present in the same verbal simulacrum of the willow.

Roman Jakobson (1960: 371)

I want now to enter into the pithy final section of my argument, the heartwood, lest the argument become over-lush and spreading, banyan-like, in form. Of course, I have tried to preserve some ordering structure by depending on the sustained arboreal analogy, and something,

Figure 4.5 The Circularity of Self-Constitution of the Tree of Knowledge (from Maturana and Varela, *The Tree of Knowledge*, 1988, p. 240).

perhaps, of a tree-like structure in respect to the relationship between its roots in moral philosophy and its crown of ethnographic data. But it is time to put the argument in a nutshell. And since an anthropologist treating philosophy or cognitive psychology is in any event jumping 'out of his tree', I might better, indeed, do this by returning to the good earth of ethnography, which is to say the landscapes, in the broadest sense of the term, of ethnographic inquiry. For, of course, trees cannot flourish in academic soil ("bare ruined choirs' they will be), unless we can do more than stir our imaginations with the social resonance of these images. In fact we have hoped to do something more here. We have hoped not only to evoke the importance of these images in the dialogues and enactments of fieldwork but have also sought to explore something of the place of arboreality in human understanding itself. If arboreal interests are ethnographically demonstrable over and over again in my fieldwork (and surely not mine alone), something else is demonstrable as well. If trees in the African and Iberian work have been constellations of cultural meaning that are potent *points de repère*, either foci of activity or repositories of special

THE TREE OF KNOWLEDGE

The Biological Roots of Human Understanding

Humberto R. Maturana & Francisco J. Varela

FOREWORD BY J. Z. YOUNG   •

Figure 4.6 The Tree of Knowledge (Cover Drawing from S. Dalí in Maturana and Varela, 1988).

social signification, or both; they are also *points de repère* that give us insight into the connectedness of culture, which is to say the play of relations of proximity (contiguity) and similarity.

For we have pretended to more in this chapter than simply to have explored a set of images widely and evocatively used in many cultures, though in variable ways.[18] We have wanted also to think about the way such images, which are found in nature, have been used to give order to nature, and especially to give moral order to the nature of human relationships, that is to give insight into the ordering of human understanding of the *connectivities* of culture. Since the scepticism of Hume, to be sure, confidence in *connectivity* has been posed as a problem. It may be true that it has become less of a problem, at least as far as the human sciences are concerned, for the problem of the direct connection of cause and effect has been largely converted to a problem of probabilistic calculation of co-occurrence. And the problem of belief by frequency of associations, while not supplanted, has been displaced sideways towards the peripheries by the study of the role of imageless thought and innate mental schema in action. Nevertheless, all is not imageless, and associations continue to play their role and, indeed, the play of images in mind and culture is something that continues to give vitality – corporeality – to the structures of lives as it gives power to the imagination.

Here let us take advantage of an opportune quotation from Roman Jakobson, which we use as an epigraph to this final section. Jakobson treats of a subtle but constant transformation in experience: the way that things contiguous to each can come to seem similar and to stand for each other, can come to provide understanding of some essential features of a passing subject of interest, say the kind of understanding we obtain when we speak of the willowiness of young women. These kinds of connections, the discovery of possible parallelisms of likeness and unlikeness in our experience, are constant in culture and are one way that cultures obtain a certain coherence of perceptually separated parts. And they are one way that order (or at least the conviction of order) is obtained in the affairs of culture. There is, of course, a whole dynamic poetic theory, the dynamic relations and transformations of things similar and things contiguous into each other, that treats of this phenomenon. The play of tropes is what it is really about. To this theory Roman Jakobson, the author of our epigraph, was a major contributor.[19]

I do not propose to treat of that theory in any extended way here; but I do wish to highlight the fact that it is such play, in this context

the imposition of similarity upon contiguity, that has long been going on with the tree imagery we review. It is a play that is popular and imaginatively active among these forest-dwelling or forest margin-dwelling cultures I have treated. For, in their passings to and fro in their contiguous forests, they have become connected to their trees, and out of this connection has come a sense of similarity between trees and themselves and trees and their body social and body politic. Trees are powerful in their imaginations, and powerful imaginations among them make use of that fact. An ethnography of these powerful imaginations, among many other attentions and attunements, is enriched by attention and attunement to the weight of these images. We might say that this attunement is necessarily attentive to the landscape that is contiguous to a particular culture, through which that particular people pass in their activities and parts (or the whole) of which it is in their power to convert to clarifying and ordering similarities. It is of more than passing interest, then, to note the way that this argument is relevant to that landscape school of local ethnography (*paisajismo*) aimed at understanding provincial and 'national character' that was once popular in Europe – certainly in the Spanish provinces where our own ethnography was conducted – in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Rodriguez Campos 1991: 99–111). Reflecting a much broader geographic determinism of the period, this romanticised if not pantheistic conception of culture sought to explain local and provincial character as a consequence of the impact of the particular natural characteristics of particular provinces or regions. One has to recognise a certain mystical element (pantheism) in this argument, a relation of *pathos* between men and the earth from which they spring, or a 'direct relation between a given landscape and the spiritual inclin-ations (the souls) and the characterological tendencies of its inhabitants' (Rodriguez Campos 1991: 107–10).

But despite the deterministic excesses of this argument it is, in interesting part, compatible with the argument being put forth here in so far as it recognises that the landscape offers, among other contiguous experiences of human life, primary images out of which or on the basis of which men and women, turning contiguities into similarities, can construct their senses of themselves, of their social relations and of the world – of their moral obligations, in short, in the widest sense of the term.[20] One does not pass through the lights and shadows of a landscape heedlessly and fruitlessly. Just as one constructs the differentiations of the social world, so one can use the entities, such as trees and forests, of the larger world to act as *points de repère*

and embodiments of categorical obligation to that differentiated social order. One can use such sign-images to make connections.

In any event, the imaginative 'power' pointed up by Jakobson that men and women have to take contiguities and make them into similarities is the kind of 'power of connectedness' that the eighteenth-century 'moral philosophers', particularly Hume, denied to reason but discovered in imagination. And though it is not the kind of political-economic power we mainly have in mind in reasonable social science argument, it is, it might be argued, a mimetic power that lies behind and is crucial to the convictions, or power to convince, with which these more obvious and reasonable worldly powers operate.[21] To have eaten of the fruit of the tree of knowledge is more than to have discovered human wilfulness and the will to power. It is to have become enlightened as to how that wilfulness becomes convincing to itself and others!

Notes

1. An originating occurrence which becomes an organising metaphor for Nur Yalman's (1967) ethnographic study *Under the Bo Tree: Studies in Caste, Kinship and Marriage in the Interior of Ceylon.*

2. See Chapter 1 ('Symbols in Ndembu Ritual') of *The Forest of Symbols* by Victor Turner (1967: 19–47).

3. See particularly Chapter 9 ('Rooting Ancestors') of *A Green Estate: Restoring Independence in Madagascar,* and page 464: 'this book is about growing, grafting

and chopping ancestries to seize the land in which they are rooted [..] In organising my account of these movements around trees [..] I have followed the local idiom. These trees do not represent the diverse common grounds where masters of the land and strangers articulate their differences about growing and dying, they *are* the common grounds' (Feeley Harnick 1991). For Europe we may anticipate the forthcoming work of Peter Sahlins on the Demoiselle movement in nineteenth-century France, deeply exploitative, in their protest, of forest symbology.

4. It is of interest that in the Western tradition the cross of the crucifixion was known as 'The Tree': a Tree of Death to interact contrastively with the Tree of Life of the Garden, as a structuralist might point out.

5. One could expatiate almost as well upon the beech or the chestnut or the hazel, for these nut trees too are richly meaningful and widely distributed in Asturias.

6. See Xaquin Rodriguez Campos (1994: 41-8), who discusses the particular sense of 'rootedness' in the landscape experienced by Galician nationalists. The particular analogy that interests us is expressed in the following: 'Efectivamente o galego expresa frecuentemente unha ligazon deproporcionada co seu lugar de nacemento "como se fora un arbre", en palabras de V. Risco (Risco 1920: 6). Imaxe que fora expresada poeticamente por E. Ponmdal moitas veces, vendose por exemplo nos seguintes versos:

Castazos de Dormea
Os de corpos ben comprido,
de graciosa estatura,
dobrados e ben erguidos:
Ouh! **castazos, semellantes**
os celtas nosos antigos;

Por fin na nosa vellez, despois do bo tempo ido,
xuntos volvemos a vernos
mais con diferente destino
(Queixumes dos pinos, 1895)'.

7. See Paul Friedrich (1970), and, in particular Chapter 2 ('Botanical ordering', pp. 13-26) for a discussion of the 'arboreal orientation' of the proto-Indo-Europeans.

8. As, for example, in the reference book of Asturian nomenclature by Xose Lluis Garcia Arias (1977), *Pueblos Asturianos: El Porque de Sus Nombres*, especially Chapter 7 ('La Fitotoponomia o Las Plantas').

9. To be consulted here would be Luciano Castanon's (1973) collection of Asturian proverbs, *Refranero Asturiano*, and also the collection edited by Xuan

Xose Sanchez Vicente and Jesus Cavedo Valle (1986), *Mitoloxia: Refraneru Asturianu (Ordenau por temes)*, in which these proverbs are thematically organised.

10. See here the developing work of Peter Sahlins, already mentioned, on this struggle over the rights to the forest in the Ariège of Pyrenean France.

11. Of interest in connection with the oak forest of Muniellos in central south-western Asturias, is, for example, the long and intense campaign, reported periodically over the years in the local press, to defend it against various kinds of exploitative development.

12. As, for example, this poem of bitter protest at the felling of the oak referenced in *La Gran Enciclopedia Asturiana*, Gijón 1970, Vol. 4, p. 67:

Mi nombre al pueblo di, bajo mi copa
que pomposa las ramas extendia,
el pueblo su solaz aqui tenia
y abrigo el estudiante de la sopa.

Mi tronco fue un altar; y a él se atropa
la noble indignación que se encendia
y retaba con ruda valentia
al invencible usurpador de Europa.

Hoy de mis hijos el menguado aliento,
con desdén indecible me maldice
y sin piedad me arranca de mi asiento!

Oh triunfo sin igual! Con voz entera
de su silla cruel ingrato dice:
Dar muerte al Carbayon antes que muera!

13. 'The withering of the trunk was enough to spread consternation throughout the city [..] Whenever the tree appeared to a passerby to be drooping, he set up a hew and cry which was echoed by the people in the street, and soon a crowd might be seen running helter skelter from all sides with buckets of water, as if (says Plutarch) they were hastening to put out a fire' (Frazer 1952: 111). See also the place of the ancient olive on the Acropolis of Athens as symbolic of the city's fate. See also in Herodotus, Book VIII. 55, the story of this olive tree, which sprang back to life immediately after it and the Acropolis were razed by the Persian invasion under Xerxes . . . a harbinger of the eventual Greek victory. Finally, see also Sophocles' *Oedipus at Colonus* (98-103).

14. David Hume (1898 (Vol. II): 95), *A Treatise of Human Nature*, as excerpted and commented upon in Louis Schnider (1967: 7–8). Hume frequently remarked that *The Treatise* was too 'youthful' and 'impetuous' a work, even though it was the groundwork for all his later efforts.

15. Discussed at length in Part I, Chapter 5 of Stephen J. Gould's (1977) *Ontogeny and Phylogeny*.

16. Steven J. Gould, the evolutionary biologist, has written repeatedly and as perceptively as anyone about the models and metaphors that have guided and misguided evolutionary thinking. In his 1991 collection *Bully for Brontosaurus: Reflections in Natural History*, he offers a sharp critique, relevant to present discussion, of the 'distortions imposed by converting tortuous paths through bushes into directed ladders'. Evolutionary continuity, he points out, 'comes in many more potential modes than the lock step of the ladder. Evolutionary genealogies are copiously branching bushes – and the history of horses is more lush and labyrinthine than most' (Gould 1991: 175). Thanks to David Sutton for this reference.

17. 'We may illustrate the course that thought has hitherto run by likening it to a web woven of three different threads, the black thread of magic, the red thread of religion and the white thread of science, if under science we may include those simple truths drawn from observation of nature of which men in all ages have possessed a store' (Frazer 1952: 826).

18. These complex images, such as the tree images, may well qualify as what Rodney Needham (1978) has called synthetic images. These images are constituted of bundles or constellations of primary qualities widely present in human experience (Needham teases us with the Jungian term archetype), though variably constellated and made meaningful only in partial ways in particular cultures. This makes them widely evocative and apt subjects for inter-cultural communication.

19. That is to say the figurative interplay of metaphor, metonym, synecdoche and irony (see Fernandez 1991). But see the pioneering statements by Roman Jakobson here, not only in the article from which the epigraph is taken (Jakobson 1960), but also in Jakobson and Halle (1956). In the instance of the epigraph quoted, Jakobson (1960: 371) goes on to say, quoting Goethe's 'Alles Vergängliche ist nur ein Gleichnis' (Anything transient is but a likeness), that 'in poetry where similarity is superinduced upon contiguity, any metonymy is slightly metaphorical and any metaphor has a metonymical tint'. At the root of these tropic transformations is a basic ambiguity, also insisted upon by Jakobson, as to the direction of connectivity that has a certain Humean ring to it.

20. See Rodriguez Campos' (1991: 108) discussion of the ethnography of the Galician regionalist Vicente M. Risco and his tendency to take for granted

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that 'the landscape acted directly upon the soul of its inhabitant', although as a close reader of the folk psychology (*Volkseele* or *Volkgeist*) of Wilhelm Wundt, Rodriguez Campos remarks, Risco understood that 'direct action' consisted in the fact that the landscape offered primary images with which humans could construct their conception of the world.

21. In this regard see the discussion of the mimetic power of transformation and conversion in Michael Taussig (1993). Though not framed in Prague School terms, what Taussig discusses is the possibility of the dynamic – 'magical' is his term – transformation in the developing contact situation between Euro-Americans and the coloured 'races' from mere contiguity to the recognition of similarity ... or what amounts to the same thing, the shift from a sense of contagion to a sense of sympathy!

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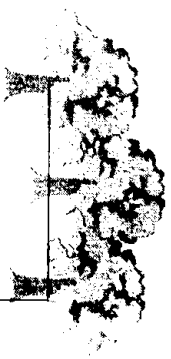
Part II

Trees, Human Life and the Continuity of Communities