Sacred Trees of India:

Adornment and Adoration as an Alternative to the Commodification of Nature

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By

Louise Fowler-Smith

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For Craig – a being at one with nature –
and for all Tree Beings.

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As the majority of the sites were only accessible by car, I was obliged to hire cars in every State I visited. It was obligatory to engage a driver in all instances when I was in India, which proved to be hugely advantageous, as my driver would also become my guide. I learnt to ask for a driver who spoke the local language and enough English so that he understood my research and we could communicate. My journeys became a quest, not only for me but also for my driver.

This book was many years in the making and sections of it were included in conference presentations and small publications internationally. These include: Louise Fowler-Smith, "Tree Veneration: How Ancient Traditions Can Lead to Pro-Environmental Behaviour". In *Using the Visual and Performing Arts to Encourage Pro-Environmental Behaviour*, ed. David Curtis, (England: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2020), 162-83; Fowler-Smith, "Adorning and Adoring: The Sacred Trees of India," *Journal for the Study of Religion, Nature and Culture*, Vol. 12, No. 3 (2018): 261-84; and Fowler-Smith, "Hindu Tree Veneration as a mode of Environmental Encounter," *Leonardo: The Journal of the International Society for the Arts, Science and Technology*, Vol. 42, No. 1 (2009): 43-51.

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Louise Fowler-Smith

FOREWORD

In the twenty-first century the place of human beings in nature is arguably more fraught and less honoured than in any previous era. The damaging consequences of the industrial revolution and the seemingly endless human desire for material goods and a secure place in the affluent late-developed world, the attainment of which is dependent upon environmental devastation, has given many reflective people pause. More than fifty years have passed since historian Lynn White Jr's ground-breaking "The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis" was published in *Science* (1967), one of the world's top academic journals since it first appeared in 1880. In this article, which became his most-cited research output, White argued that Western science and technology, which he understood as products of Christianity, were the cause of the chasm between modern humanity and nature. White traced the story of economic exploitation of the earth to the monasteries of medieval Europe, and calendars and other texts that portray and teach that humanity and nature, while both created by God, are radically different because humans are made in God's image and given dominion over nature.

In contrast to this instrumentalist, exploitive, extractive (non)relationship, White argued that in "Antiquity every tree, every spring, every stream, every hill had its own *genius loci*, its guardian spirit. These spirits were accessible to men, but were very unlike men; centaurs, fauns, and mermaids show their ambivalence. Before one cut a tree, mined a mountain, or dammed a brook, it was important to placate the spirit in charge of that particular situation, and to keep it placated. By destroying pagan animism, Christianity made it possible to exploit nature in a mood of indifference to the feelings of natural objects". This contention is borne out by much evidence from Greek and Roman mythological and ritual texts, and the range of divine and semi-divine beings associated with natural phenomena. These include *hamadryads* (female tree nymphs) whose lives ended if the trees they inhabited were felled, and the spirit beings called *naiads* that occupied bodies of water. Similarly, there were gods of the rocky mountain peaks (the Ourea in Greek, the Montes in Latin), and of the winds, and stars. The great gods of the Greeks and Romans were similarly embedded in the natural world, with deities like Helios, the sun god, Selene the moon goddess, Eos the dawn goddess, and

Poseidon the sea god, all ruled by Zeus, the sky god, whose great shrine at Dodona, in Epirus, was a grove of oak trees. Zeus himself was believed to lodge in one particularly aged tree, and messages from the god to pilgrims were received in several ways, including: casting lots; interpreting the rustling of the trees; and interpreting the sounds of the sacred spring deep within the grove.

Louise Fowler-Smith's *Sacred Trees of India: Adornment and Adoration as an Alternative to the Commodification of Nature* serves to remind readers that these attitudes of respect, reverence, and awe toward nature, and in particular trees, have survived to the present, and that the religious traditions of India are an inspiration to those seeking spiritual nourishment from a renewed appreciation of nature. This beautifully illustrated study explores the remarkable positive impact that connection to trees brings humans; it considers the beauty and aesthetic appeal of trees, and the immense losses that the severance from it have visited upon the citizens of modern cities. The book's focus is India, which Fowler-Smith has researched for more than a decade. There are separate chapters covering sacred trees of fertility and marriage, sacred trees of healing and personal protection, and trees that are revered by communities other than Hindus, such as Buddhists and Muslims. The Hindu tradition is revealed in all its variety and local nuance, and the Adivasi (Indigenous) perspective is respectfully discussed. Individual trees are lovingly described, and sacred groves are also considered.

Religious traditions are cultural products, and the acts of veneration that Fowler-Smith records are the result of complex interactions between nature and culture. Deities associated with trees are both male and female, but the devotional focus is very often on women, who seek protection from sacred trees at crucial stages of life, including marriage, getting pregnant and becoming a mother, and coping with the socially risky and fraught status of widowhood. Fowler-Smith describes the rituals attendant upon sacred trees, such as: adornment with fabrics, ribbons, bells, and flower garlands; making offerings of food and jewellery; anointing with holy water and other liquids; and on occasion the sacrifice of animals. *Sacred Trees of India* is both an informative study of tree worship in India, and a personal memoir of Fowler-Smith's creative engagement in popular religion during her travels in India, and how it inspired her artistic practice as a photographer, painter, and teacher of art. The book is relevant and powerful for a contemporary readership, living on the brink of ecological disaster and the loss of biodiversity, and seeking a renewed relationship with nature. Trees are kin to humans, and the richness of human

interactions with trees is encountered on every page. It is my privilege to recommend Fowler-Smith's beautiful book to readers around the world.

Carole M. Cusack
Professor of Religious Studies
University of Sydney

INTRODUCTION

> Imagination is a tree. It has the integrative virtues of a tree. It is root and boughs. It lives between earth and sky. It lives in the earth and in the wind. The imagined tree imperceptibly becomes the cosmological tree, the tree which epitomizes a universe, which makes a universe.[1]
> —Gaston Bachelard

I know I am not alone as a lover of trees. As kids we would climb them. The feeling of being above adults and the world they represent enticed us to build houses in their branches. Omnipresent and in their millions, they framed the sky. Little pockets of light shone through their leaves and their boughs would shield us from the harsh summer sun. This is where we would go to live our childhood fantasies–hidden, yet above the real world, in another universe. Growing up I spent many wonderful days on my father's farm near the Barrington Tops region of New South Wales, Australia. In my teenage years one of my favourite activities was to climb the highest hill on the farm and sit under a patch of large old gum trees while watching the sun disappear over the horizon. These trees seemed to possess a wisdom or a sense of knowing. They had witnessed more than any person, certainly more than I had. In my mind they were beautiful, grand, living beings, deserving of great respect.

Some people find them annoying. They drop their leaves, make a mess in the backyard and fill up the gutters, causing all sorts of problems. People chop them down, then pave their backyard completely to ensure control. Urban myth tells of a man who concreted his entire garden, installing plastic plants in pots evenly around his yard. He watered his plastic garden on a regular basis, to get rid of the dust.

Formative experiences on the land inspired me to become an artist in my late teens; an artist with the goal of expressing the wonder of the natural world. These aims also infiltrated my vocation as a teacher. In both of these roles I began to understand the role of perception in cognition. How we perceive and contemplate the land affects how we treat the land, and ultimately how we live on it. We are less likely to honour and respect the land if we see it as separate from ourselves.

One day, still a child, I travelled to some distant paddocks with my father and a local farmer. As we stood in the field the farmer pointed to a

copse of trees on his land, which had been predominantly cleared and said, "I gotta get rid of that vermin". Thinking that he was referring to field rats, I asked where the vermin were, when he clarified that he was talking about the trees. Rather than seeing them as vital parts of the environment, holding the soil together and providing nutrients and shade amongst so many other things, this man perceived them as pests and resented their "invasive" presence.

Many years later I made my first trip to India at the invitation of my sister. She was aware of my interest in trees and when she saw an adorned sacred tree in Tamil Nadu, she made some enquiries and discovered that this practice occurs over many parts of the country. She spoke to me of how people would decorate trees and conduct rituals around them. Intrigued, I decided to travel to India to see for myself. I was aware of ancient traditions in parts of Europe where people would tie cloth around the branches of certain trees, often for luck, and was expecting something similar. I had no idea how diverse, widespread, and profoundly beautiful the sites I was about to discover would be, and that I would spend the next ten years of my life on a journey to discover India's sacred trees.

The first time I came across a group of venerated trees in India I was struck by their transformation. The trees, smeared with golden-yellow turmeric and red powder, and laden with ribbons and bells, enhanced my perception of what was an otherwise normal grouping of trees set amid the bush land. This clump formed a tree temple dedicated to fertility and marriage where women would come to perform a ritual to wish for a husband or a child. I witnessed how devotees transformed these trees into an embodiment of reverence and enchantment through the act of adornment.

I became obsessed with the search for honoured trees and have since made numerous field trips to India to research and photograph the practice of adorning and honouring the tree as an act of veneration. Over a ten-year period, I travelled across seventeen states of India, through Himachal Pradesh, Delhi, Haryana, Uttarakhand, Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Odisha and Jharkhand in the north, Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Gujarat and Maharashtra in the centre, and through Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, Kerala, and Tamil Nadu in the south, taking photographs, recording oral histories, and interviewing anthropologists and botanists who specialised in the field.

Fig. Intro-1. Nature Temple, grounds of Murugan Temple, Palani, Tamil Nadu.

These encounters led me to consider that the sacred aesthetic of these trees played a considerable role in the broader preservation of the environment.[2] Through religious acts of decoration, the tree is an object adorned and adored. The tree, once aesthetically enhanced, becomes something other than a "tree". It can become a home for the sacred; a representation of the sacred, and in itself becomes protected and demarcated from the "mundane", attaining honourable status in its own right. To walk through the natural environment and stumble across one of these transformed trees can be a profound experience, one that involves all the senses and is available to all, regardless of nationality, tradition, or faith position. Through the stories told to me by local people, pilgrims, and protectors of trees and groves in India it became clear to me that the importance of perception remains pertinent irrespective of how the land is managed across cultural divides.

It is the intention of this book to provide inspiring imagery of the decorated and venerated trees of India that demonstrate an attitude towards sacralising and protecting the environment that contrasts with the typical Western outlook, and which may contribute to the process of re-cognition that the West so desperately needs in this environmentally challenged world.

As a country at a turning point in terms of its commitment to reversing the effects of climate change and severe deforestation, the dual processes of adorning and adoring trees in India present us with fascinating potential for the reinvigoration of nature worship in a quickly modernising nation. In my travels, observing veneration in states from the north to the south of India, diversity is evident and this points to a complex and multi-layered relationship of religious practice devoted to the environment. The decoration of trees, through the application of pigment to the bark, the tying of ribbons, string, cloth, bells, bangles, cradles, flowers, beads, chains, and locks of hair to the branches, or placing statues and votive paraphernalia at the trunk, transforms the tree into a channel between the worshipper and the deity. The decoration of certain trees demarcates the tree as special and invites people to participate in the enhancement of the tree as a glorification of the gods. This broadens the way society approaches the tree, with the aesthetic enhancement enabling a change of consciousness as the ground around it becomes hallowed.

Overview

This book puts forward ideas for transformation at a grass roots level, with a focus on the importance of perception as an agent of change in humanity. As an introduction, Chapter One discusses the importance of trees to life on this planet and why we need to protect them. It will briefly summarise the significance, wonder and even magic of trees in their relationship to the earth, humans, and the future. Chapter Two explores how our perception of the environment influences how we respond to it, citing key thinkers on the philosophy of aesthetics and nature such as John Ruskin, Kenneth Clarke, Theodore Adorno, Thomas Berry, and J. Baird Callicott. It argues that a respect for the environment can be strengthened by the symbolic nature of images and suggests that contemporary Western capitalist society has come to perceive the land as separate or other, creating a disconnect from nature in contrast to our ancestors, who perceived nature as part of themselves and vice versa. To back up these ideas it also gives examples of how trees have been worshipped universally across time. This leads to Chapter Three, which discusses the extent and importance of trees and groves to religious life historically in India, and how adoration and adornment complement one another. It gives examples of rituals and beliefs associated with tree veneration and provides a background to the practice of tree worship in India, a practice that has survived where others have ceased across the planet.

The remaining chapters of the book detail lived examples of tree worship, recorded over a ten-year period of field research in India. Chapters Four, Five and Six focus on wish-fulfilling trees or *kalpa vrikshas*, and are organised thematically. Chapter Four covers wishing trees devoted to fertility and marriage, Chapter Five to health, healing, personal protection, while Chapter Six provides a variety of examples of tree worship that extend beyond Hinduism, into Buddhist and Muslim traditions. Chapter Seven is dedicated to the important subject of sacred tree groves across India and wishing trees dedicated to the land. Chapter Eight also focuses on sacred groves, but from an indigenous or Adivasi perspective.

It is my hope that this book will offer an alternative way of perceiving and cognising trees, with the ultimate aim of encouraging the protection of trees and forests. In Asia, the practice of venerating the tree is an ancient tradition that is becoming less prominent and could cease to exist in the future, thus needs to be preserved and encouraged. The importance of trees in every aspect of their existence cannot be overstated. They are vital to our existence so continued deforestation across the planet needs to cease, as it is putting our existence in danger. We need to re-cognise the earth as a living reality and reinvent our relation to the Earth as a species. One way in which we might achieve this change, this book suggests, is through examining culturally potent perceptions of the natural landscape.

Notes

[1] Roger Cook, *The Tree of Life: Image for the Cosmos* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1974), 9.

[2] Louise Fowler-Smith, "Adorning and Adoring: The Sacred Trees of India", *Journal for the Study of Religion, Nature and Culture*, Vol. 12, No. 3 (August 2018): 261-84.

CHAPTER ONE

WHY TREES ARE ESSENTIAL TO LIFE

Trees and the Earth

Trees are phenomenal living beings. They represent the majority of the earthly biomass on this planet yet their importance to life and to the biosphere is often underestimated. Forests are the lungs of our planet. Trees produce the oxygen that we breathe, making them vital to our existence. They act as giant filters, absorbing pollutants such as carbon dioxide, carbon monoxide, sulphur dioxide, and nitrogen dioxide from the air and preventing greenhouse gas from being emitted into the atmosphere. They have the ability to absorb and store up to 22 tons of carbon dioxide in their wood, roots and leaves.[1] Trees clean dangerous chemicals and pollutants from the soil by storing or changing the pollutant into something more benign. This is why the cleanest water may be found running through our forests.

According to Fred Hageneder, author of *The Spirit of Trees: Science, Symbiosis and Inspiration*, every tree could be described as a water column, providing the air with a constant supply of moisture.[2] Trees contribute to the stabilisation of soil temperature by the fact that during the day the interior of the tree is cooler than the surrounding air, and conversely, at night it is warmer. This contributes to the warming of the soil in winter, and at night, and the reverse in summer, or during the day.

Trees stop soil erosion, conserve rainwater and reduce water runoff and the build-up of sediments after storms. The roots of a tree loosen the soil and create a water reservoir for all plants that exist around them. The root system can cover a surface area of several hundreds of square metres,[3] holding the soil together so it does not erode. The dropping of leaves provides essential nutrients to surrounding life forms and they provide a home for countless species of animal and plant life. In Japan, marine chemist Katsuhiko Matsunaga discovered that when leaves decompose, humic acid seeps into the ocean, which assists with the fertilisation of plankton that, in turn, feeds sea life. As a result, Japanese fishermen began

a campaign called “Forests are the lovers of the sea”, planting trees along coastlines and rivers.[4]

Trees are important to climate. They shade us in the summer and act as windbreaks against winter winds. They influence the temperature and humidity of the air through the absorption and evaporation of rain, contributing to a balanced water table through their water metabolism. The clear felling of trees affects surrounding water tables, causing springs to dry up and the inevitable loss of natural plant and animal life.

The benefits of planting trees in an urban environment are plentiful. One only has to spend time in a “leafy” suburb to experience how much cooler it feels, with the trees shading the buildings thus contributing to energy savings. We also know that trees reduce air and noise pollution and provide homes for wildlife. The sounds of bird song alone are important to the well-being of local communities.

Trees may be considered electromagnetic phenomena as they contribute to the electrical and magnetic forces that are fundamental in nature. They balance the electrical charges between the ionosphere and the Earth’s surface and are essential in the maintenance of the Earth’s magnetic field as a whole. In this context the notion of tree hugging becomes more understandable. If the electrical current of a tree decreases the balanced distribution of nutrients breaks down, leading to the inability of the tree to fight parasites. In a sense the tree doesn’t have the required energy to fight the parasites, so by hugging a tree, we actually give it energy!

American neuro-anatomist Harold Saxton Burr proved that trees possess a bioelectrical field that reacts sensitively to “physiological activities, changes of light and darkness, and to air electricity and changes in the Earth’s magnetic field.”[5] The bioelectrical field of trees also reacts with the main solar cycle and the phases of the moon. It has been shown that the electrical currents of trees are directly connected with electrical currents in the soil, the air, electromagnetic waves from the sun and planets and changes in the magnetic field of the planet.

Because the strength of the planets magnetic field is reliant on the concentration of vegetation, research shows that increased global deforestation directly correlates with a radical decrease in the Earth’s magnetic field. Humanity is contributing to the decline of the Earth’s magnetic field through the clear felling of forests, destroying the only effective protective shield the planet has against hard particle radiation from the sun and the cosmos.[6]

Trees are ingenious life forms. It is known that the core of the root of a tree contains something called the xylem, which is made up of long hollow cells that are all connected, called tracheids. The role of the tracheid