

Palm: the tree of life in myths and monotheistic religions

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Abstract

The function of nature, particularly trees, and the role they play in the livelihood and identity of mankind, have been evident throughout the history. Men determined the status of trees based on various approaches, such as the benefits of trees for them, their existential perception of trees, or the recommendation of the religions due to some features of trees. This status may have transformed from a biological feeding resource into a myth based on these approaches; it can be stated that this transformation is considered because of different functions of trees, including healing, the secret of immortality, fertility, etc. Studying the status of tree in references and performing a visual review through ancient civilizations such as Mesopotamia, Jiroft of Iran, and India demonstrate the belief and respect of people of these lands for special kinds of trees (with special features). These beliefs can be observed in the gathered relevant evidence. Such examples in literary or art works transform into myths by a prominent description or through the evaluation of accessibility, even creating some sort of sacredness for the tree. Thus, study of the trees which share some features is similar to following an archetype. Several common features between the functions of sacred tree and date palm can be viewed by reviewing the presented examples on features of palms in the majority of civilizations and in the definitions given in religions. This theory can be suggested in a comparative-analytical method. The meaning of sacred tree is accordant with the effects and features of the palm.

Keywords: myth; tree of life; sacred tree; palm.

Introduction

The identity of tree in each era is an integral part of man's life (based on existential reasons); this identity represents its inherent values and features, since the primary civilizations till now. The magnitude of this attitude amazes the mankind and generates the feeling of adoration, and sometimes consecration among people, causing the emergence of sacred tree theory. From this perspective, some concepts are developed regarding the features of sacred tree which are assumed to have confirmatory examples. This study discusses the theories of tree of life and its accordance with palm tree in related works and documents.

Mythical principles regarding tree

The existence of plants and trees in man's life is an obvious matter; trees, regardless of their type, contain many benefits for men, and every issue during the life of mankind, from the most minimal matters to the most general ones, is related to the trees in some way, such as creating a shelter, producing food, pharmaceutical and therapeutic properties, capability of healing, etc. This pervasive presence in man's life causes the tree to be sometimes considered among the totems and sacred affairs, providing references for proving this notion to be an archetype. In various civilizations, this influence is sometimes beyond the facial aspects and involves the interior ones, as some civilizations suppose special indications and metaphors for the life of trees which have effective concepts on human's destiny. Such indications make the tree an inseparable part of man's life since the inception of his life on earth till today. The benefits of tree for man, dependent on the type of tree and climate in different civilizations, generate a particular type of concepts. The influence of such concepts is considerable; in fact, these notions transform into the myths which affect the culture, art and consequently life of the people of these civilizations.

The pervasive presence of plant figures in Iranian art can be traced to the ancient belief of plant consecration and the Iranians' considerable respect for nature. In all eras, flowers and decorative figures were drawn on objects and buildings (Nadim, 2007). This indicates the status of myths and deep religious and national beliefs among Iranians. This theme is mingled with all nations and civilizations, confirming the mythical aspect of the aforementioned designs. Several reasons can be counted for the wide presence of plants in Iran and other nations. Throughout the myths and legends of various nations, these plants are mentioned with respect and sometimes consecration: 1- belief in human's transformation into plant after an unjust death. This case is exemplified by the story of Siavash's blood (Rangchi, 2010). 2- Man's fertilization from the tree, fruit, and seed. This case can be viewed in the story of Mashya and Mashyana (the very first couple in Iranian myths) which grew in, and were born from, the stalk of sorrel. Moreover, another indication of this symbol is evident in the story of "the Girl of Bitter Orange and Bergamot" in which the main motif of "first couple creation" myth is still present. Some researchers opine that the examples of transformation of plants into man and vice versa which are evident in such stories are originated from the belief of plant totemism (Mohseni &

Valizadeh, 2011). In Greek myths, “Leto” is a sacred palm which bears Apollo and Artemis. 3- The efficiency of plant in feeding and healing, and the reputation of some legendary plant for growing the fruit of immortality. 4- The relation between plant and an eternal occurrence. Some plants have gained respect and consecration due to being associated with a sacred person or special religious places or rituals (Afzal Tousi, 2014). Actually, the story of many sacred trees or events is associated with holy characters such as Buddha, Krishna, or Zarathustra. Thus, some trees are planted beside Gods, especially in Hindu and Buddhism rituals. 5- Praising and adoring the spirit of trees among some tribes; the tradition of worshipping the trees is more ancient than any other tradition in India; a seal has been recently discovered in Muhinjar in Pakistan with an image of “Aswattha” tree being worshipped. This seal dates back to 3000-4000 B.C. In fact, trees in India are not only the source of providing shades, fresh air, fuel, food or drug, but also are adored and worshipped because of having a spirit. Thus, the number of sacred trees, which are mostly associated with Goddesses or temples, is more than 40. In Hindu ritual, tree has a spirit like any other creature. It also has Goddesses and even a mother inside, named “Ira”, the daughter of “Daska”; in fact, each group of plant of mother plants has its own unique mother. For instance, she created the bushes and grass, and “Lata” created the flowers grown in sandy grounds, flower-laden trees, and fruits. “Ira” means “water, and since the plants cannot survive without water, is considered the mother of all plants. In fact, the plants have spirit and pray. The spirits of some trees act as the guardians, as some couples even sit under trees before beginning the marital life. Sometimes, the influence of these beliefs is so strong that other trees are important to enable women to bear children. In this case, this is not the tree which is being worshipped, but the spirit inside. Aswattha is one of the sacred trees of India. That called “Vishnu” tree. Aswattha or Bodhi, or Bo tree also known as one of the Indian sacred trees and some people believe that Vishnu was born under this tree.

“Banyan” (*Ficus benghalensis*) tree is considered as sacred in Buddhism and Hindu rituals. This tree with its large and long roots represents eternal life and in a song called the “Song of the Lord”, Krishna uses the banyan tree as a symbol to describe the true meaning of life to the warrior hero Arjuna. This tree is the symbol of Shiva and eternal life, because new roots emerge from its sticks all the time. Moreover, Banyan tree is the symbol of Brahma, being worshipped on “Vad-savitiri” 49th day as well as Sundays in June and May by women to give their husbands a long lifetime. (Gupta, 1971). In fact, the plants have spirit, and pray. The spirits of some trees act as the guardians, as some couples even sit under trees before beginning the marital life. Sometimes, the influence of these beliefs is so strong that other trees are important to enable women to bear children. In this case, this is not the tree which is being worshipped, but the spirit inside. “Ashuka” is one of the sacred trees of India. In some of the reliefs in Hindu temples and statues, “Lakshmi” is seen leaning his hand on Ashuka. “Vishnu” tree is also known as one of the Indian sacred trees and some people believe that Vishnu was born under this tree. “Tree worshipers in India assume that tree can in some fashion communicate with, feel the touch of

respond to human beings who approach them with offerings ,petitions, and affectionate care ”(Haberman, 2013).

Baobab (scientific name: *Adansonia digitate*) tree, in its amazing and huge stature, is one of the sacred trees of Madagascar which has a lifespan of approximately 3000 years; it acts similar to the Gods of death, absorbing the spirit of the dead in itself. This case indicates that the nature is an archetype in cultural history of mankind. This archetype is sometimes considered as the symbol of consecration in religions, or the manifestation of Gods.

Symbolic expression of tree

Many cultures deem the plant as the origin and root of life. In Mithraism, for instance, when Mitra kills a cow, life appears from its corpse in the form of grains, promising the new life and creation in Mithraism (Amuzegar, 1995). Since tree is seen as the origin of life and growth, it is considered as the symbol of fertility and life. It is a representation of death and resurrection, which are fundamental principles of religions and holy books (Malherbe, 2008). Since tree is planted in the soil and its sticks are up in the air, it is believed as a symbol of communion between earth and heaven as well as the representation of spiritual blessing and enlightening (Shovalieh, 2009). The cycle of life and death of plants and trees indicates the spirituality which is associated with the notion of heaven, hell and limbo. This spirituality manifests itself in religious thoughts more deeply, such as religious doctrines and principles, and consequently in the artworks with such themes (Fig.1).



Fig.1:Floweres of LakshmiTree&Banyan Tree
(Source: <http://landarchs.com/top-10-sacred-trees/>)

Based on the aforementioned beliefs, tree is considered as “Axis Mundi” and is located in the centre of the universe (Eliade, 1997) and is an allegory of man with his roots in the soil, and a wish for ascending toward the heaven (Eliade, 1997; De Becourt, 1994). Mirca Eliadeh also states that the tree is laden with a holy power, because it is in a vertical mode, and that is why it grows; it loses all of its leaves and they renew again, so the tree survives. It dies several times and revives again (Shovalieh & Gorbrand, 2009). This notion is very strong and influential, like metaphors such as likening the three symbolic worlds, or reflecting the three main parts of a tree

structure: root, trunk, and leaves and sticks. These references are even seen in the literature. Dante depicts the design of global spheres in the form of a tree which its root is ascending and growing toward the sky (Black & Green, 2004).

Tree of life

One of the most common concepts in different cultures and civilizations regarding tree is “tree of life”. Tree of life is a combination of various plants which are considered sacred because of their long lifespan, beauty, and efficiency. Tree of life is exemplified by “cedar” tree with its valuable wood, “date palm”, “vine” with its grape, and “pomegranate tree” which is seen as the symbol of fertility because it has hundreds of seeds inside (De Becourt, 1994). Trees and plants with more stability and longer lifespan are mentioned in the category of myths.

In the myths, the tree of life or “cosmic life” is mentioned with different interpretations some of which were mentioned earlier, such as immortality, youth revival, healing, health, and knowledge (Gaokerena tree which symbolizes fertility and efficiency).

In ancient iconography and the remained myth, figures exist in the form of tree, and its related Goddesses and guardians such as peacock and goat in Iran, snake and Griffin in Mesopotamia, fish, etc. in different forms. According to Sumerian and Akand texts, the king of Mesopotamia lived in the secure zone of Gods, in the “garden of marvels” where the tree of life grew and the “water of life” or “fountain of youth” was running. The king had to safeguard the tree of life. Thus, the king is depicted genuflecting on the tree of life under the shining sun on some of remained figures from that era (Sattari, 2005).

The healing characteristic of trees for saving the life of mythical heroes in narrative and fiction literature has been explained in Iran and other nations. This feature is exemplified by the healing of Rostam by eating the fruit of Tamarisk tree. Even the notion of enlivening which is exemplified in cases such as first creation of Man, or couple of mankind in myths of India, Japan, Scandinavia, Malaysia, Madagascar, and Yakut, is supposed to be originated from plants and trees. The surprising point is that the flowers and trees grow from heroes’ blood in wars throughout the vital cycle between Man and plant, just the same as creation of Man from plants and tree. From Attis’s blood, violet grows; corn rose and rose grow out of Adonis’s blood, and wheat and plant emerge from Osiris’s blood (Hassanzadeh, 2002). Various civilizations depict heroes such as Gilgamesh, Seth (Son of Adam), and Solomon (Peace Be upon Him) in the pursuit of the sacred tree. Some believe the sacred tree to be palm, while others opine that it should be vine, or plane tree. Celtic legends which are represented in Scandinavian art, believe the sacred tree to be *Fraxinus Excelsior* (Afzal Tousi, 2014).

Palm: the sacred tree

Given the brief review on the meanings, status and function of tree in various civilizations and human thoughts, date palm is a close item to the concept of tree of life, and as its implications

were mentioned earlier, its functions are studied in the cultural and visual history. In the figures, tree of life is usually placed between two nuns, or two legendary creatures, which are bound to protect it. This tree is known as the symbol of sacred and eerie power (De Becourt, 1994)(Fig.2). Furthermore, tree of life is represented in two forms in the figures and myths: it is shown either with the evergreen leaves(such as Laurel tree) as an implication for immortality or with the four-season leaves which symbolizes the continuous livening and coming back to life, representing the dynamism of life (Shovalieh, 2009). Date palm also is seen as an ancient symbol of prosperity and victory, and Jung defines it as the symbol of “Anima” (Serlou, 2010).

In Mesopotamian civilization, one of the most ancient human civilizations, trees have a practical and mostly mythical and holy role, as the holy marriage between Mother-Goddess and God of grains (named “Tammuz”) is described as the holy communion between sacred palm and sacred grain of wheat. By reviewing the remained artworks, it seems that sacred tree is the same as palm (Afzal Tousi, 2014). In the most ancient design of palm, a figure from the male palm with short sticks at the end of its inflorescence can be seen (3100 B.C.).About 2000 B.C., plant motifs of palm, papyrus, Lotus and lili promoted in Western Asia. The Minoan civilization in Crete, as a significant cultural region in Mediterranean, promoted the diverse designs and forms of palm which had adopted from Egyptian through Asia Minor to the East (Wilson, 1994). On the top of sacred tree as the symbol of fertility, a crown of palm figure (New Ashurian, 7th Century B.C.) is placed. Palm was sacred in the eyes of “Ra” and was known as his status. Moreover, grooved palm is the unique mark of God of immortality. In the era of new Kingdom, palm was used as the guardian of royal documents (Warner, 2010). In fact, palm is the tree of Sumerians (Goddard, 1979)(Fig.3).



Fig.2: Tree of life with the palm as the central figure. 860-865 B.C., Northwest of Nimrod
(Source: Wilson, 1994)



Fig.3: Sacred date palm in Sumerian and Babylonian era



Fig.3: Adam and Eve with a date palm between them.

(Source: <http://www.fao.org/docrep/006/y4360e/y4360e06.htm>)

Palm, as the tree of life, is frequently used in ancient art, such as a golden chalice from “Marlik” hill (1000 B.C.) with the height of approximately 20cms along with the story of legend of life and is accompanied by one goat on each side (Negahban, 1999). The figure of palm is observed with the two goats on a piece of clayon “Hassanlou” hill circa 2000 B.C. (Prada, 1996)(Fig.4& 5). It is assumed to be the tree of life, while it reminds the famous story of conversation between goat and palm in Pahlavi language, which demonstrates the ancientness and importance of this tree among Iranians.



Fig.4: Palm tree between two goats, “Hassanlou” hill, Iran
(Source: Prada, 1996)



Fig.5: Goddess Ishtar with Palm

Impression of a Neo-Assyrian seal dated ca. 750-650 BCE. British Museum
(Source: <http://www.matrifocus.com/SAM08/spotlight.htm>)

One of the most frequently seen elements on the soap-made plates in Jiroft civilization is the figure of tree(Fig.6). The most common tree figure is palm. One of the most important reasons for recording this figure is that the palm is an ethnic tree in that region. The link of this tree with other pictorial elements such as goat and lion reinforces the probability of symbolizing the palm as the tree of life(Fig.7). The possibility that these animals are the guardians of tree of life is so close to the definition given earlier on the myth and concept of tree of life.



Fig.6:Stone jar with green-gray color and repeated figures, and three rows decorated with the figure of palm tree. Height: 23.5 cm, ancientness: 3000 B.C. Region: south of Iran. Location of preservation: Metropolitan museum

(Source: <http://siyahgoosh.blogspot.com/1394/12/24/post-552/>)



Fig.7

(Source: <http://www.iranicaonline.org/img/v14f6/jiroft-iv-04.jpg>)

The figures of goat and palm in what is regarded as the first animation of the world can be seen in “Shahr-e-Sukhteh” (The burnt city). These figures date back to 2000-3000 B.C(Fig.8).



Fig.8: Palm tree, Shahr-e-Sukhteh

(Source: <http://iranwire.com/features/6165/>)

According to Pope, the decoration of palm leaves is one of the most common decorations in ancient art; it is frequently seen in civilizations of Iran, Mesopotamia, and ancient Greece. But the design of Iranian palm in composition is rather different. Many arrays are remained from palm leaves in wall moldings in Kish and Ctesiphon, being widely discussed in “the book of Iranian art” (Pope&Ackermann, 2008). It can be stated that despite some adoptions from Ashuri or Greek art, some arrays, particularly in the composition of three-feathered palm for creating a covering design in the wall, or its square-shaped composition and creating sun-like roundels in Kish moldings, are considered among the beautiful examples of arrays decorated with palm in art of Iran. Especially, it gets a completely Iranian mood when it is combined with the wings, or with the pomegranate, as it is seen in one of the remained works of Sasanian era in Kish (Afzal Tousi, 2014) (Fig.9).

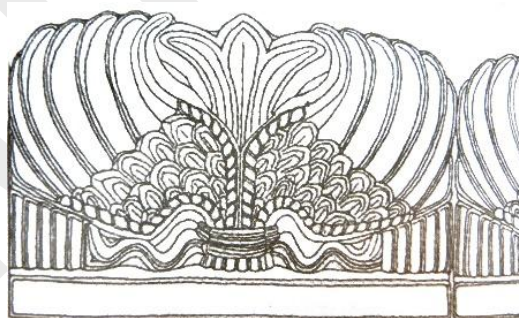


Fig.9:Palm motif in composition with the wing, Kish

(Source: Pope, 2008)

Myth and symbolic expression of palm tree in monotheistic religions have lofty statuses, such as art of Judaism and Christianity. In the Book of Revelations, it is stated that palm stick is the symbol of martyrdom: “then I beheld, a large number standing before the throne..they were wearing white clothes with palm stick in their hands.” On the day of an ancient feast (the

memorial of Moses who had live 40 years out of the city) Jews reside in a chamber made of palm in the countryside for a week (Afzal Tousi, 2014). Palm is also the symbol of majority of Christian martyrs as well as Holy Mary (Hall, 2004). We read in Holy Quran that Holy Mary shelter under a palm tree at the time of giving birth to Jesus. There, a spring ran under her feet, and she ate the fresh date of palm tree.¹ Palm is also a reminiscent of gathering of the people on the day of entry of Jesus to Jerusalem. Today, palm stick is replaced with a cross composed of pieces of palm (Warner, 2010). These interpretations can even be extended to the concept of ascent of Jesus Christ. The belief of Jesus ascent and the perpetuity of this notion in Christianity and Islam remind a link between the palm tree and issue of immortality that does not seem to be arbitrary, somehow confirming the sacredness and symbolic aspect of tree of life. Furthermore, many fruits and their trees are mentioned in Holy Quran, but the name of palm is repeated more frequently than others.² The word “palm” (نخل in Arabic) and its plural form (نخيل) are mentioned in twenty verses of Holy Quran³. The heaven is described to have numerous trees in many verses and narratives. Tuba tree is one of the heaven trees frequently mentioned in Quran. This tree is the symbol of life and has always been the inspiration of plant-shaped figures. Tuba is an integral element of heaven and a sign of perpetual life and secret of immortality. Meanwhile, other divine characteristics such as knowledge and awareness of good and evil are attributed to this tree. Holy Quran depicts the heaven with the trees under which springs are running (Ahmad Maleki, 1999). In Akhlaq-e Nasiri (Nasiri ethics) and in the discussion on the method of growth of plants and the penetration of plant spirit in them and their different levels, Nasir al-din al-Tousi states a few lines about the uniqueness of palm tree and its multidimensional similarity to animals, then adapting this discussion with a tradition quoted from Muhammad (Peace Be upon Him) in which He refers to palm tree as the aunt of mankind; then he states:” ..And what is cited from traditions of prophet of Islam implies that palm tree is the aunt of mankind. The prophet of Islam states: Respect palm tree, as it is your aunt, and is created from the residual of Adam’s clay (Nasir-e-din Tousi, 1985). It is even true among Arabs, as they call palm as their aunt and has a proverb that says: “my father died, but I’ll have my aunt (palm tree) to assist me instead.” Palm is one of the significant trees in Iranian habitant and is nutritionally important in dry areas with hot climate such as south and southwest of Iran (current Iraq and Mesopotamia). Since it is always green and its wide leaves provide a permanent sheltering shade, its pervasive presence and usage in pictorial culture of Iran and Mesopotamia as well as Islamic and Christian art is logically justified.

¹ Holy Quran, Surah of “Maryam”, Verse 22.

² Holy Quran, Surah of “An’aam”, verse 99 & 141

³ Holy Quran, Surah of “Raa’d”, verse 4; Surah of “Nahl”, verse 11 & 67; Surah of “Asra”, verse 91; Surah of “Kahf”, verse 32; Surah of “Maryam”, verses 23 & 25; Surah of “Taha”, verse 71; Surah of Mo’menoun, verse 19; Surah of “Yasin”, verse 34; Surah of “Q”, verse 10; Surah of “Qamar”, verse 20; Surah of “Rahman”, verse 11 & 68.

Conclusion

By reviewing the archetype of tree in the most ancient civilizations of the world and its diverse functions, it is concluded that some features of a tree is considerable. These features imply the existence of a tree with unique characteristics such as healing power, perpetuity and immortality, fertility, etc. moreover, this discretion is prominent in the identity-related issues, where a special type of tree is known as “sacred tree”. The focus on palm tree is evident in the presented documents from ancient civilization. Furthermore, the citations of palm tree in monotheistic religions adapts to the described characteristics of sacred tree in the aforementioned civilizations. Thus, it can be stated that the mentioned characteristics regarding sacred tree adapt to the palm tree which is mentioned in ancient civilizations as well as monotheistic religions such as Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.

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