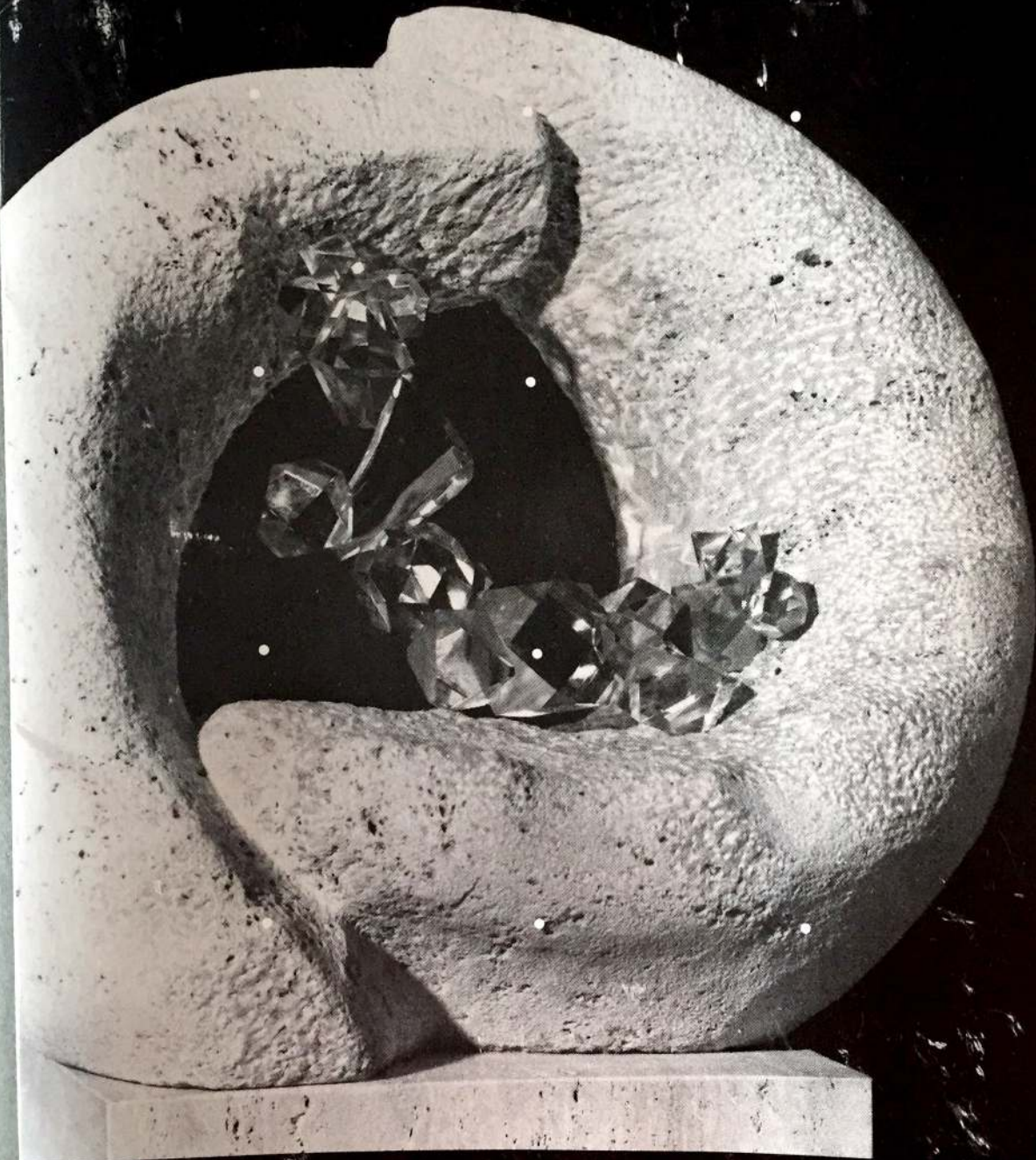
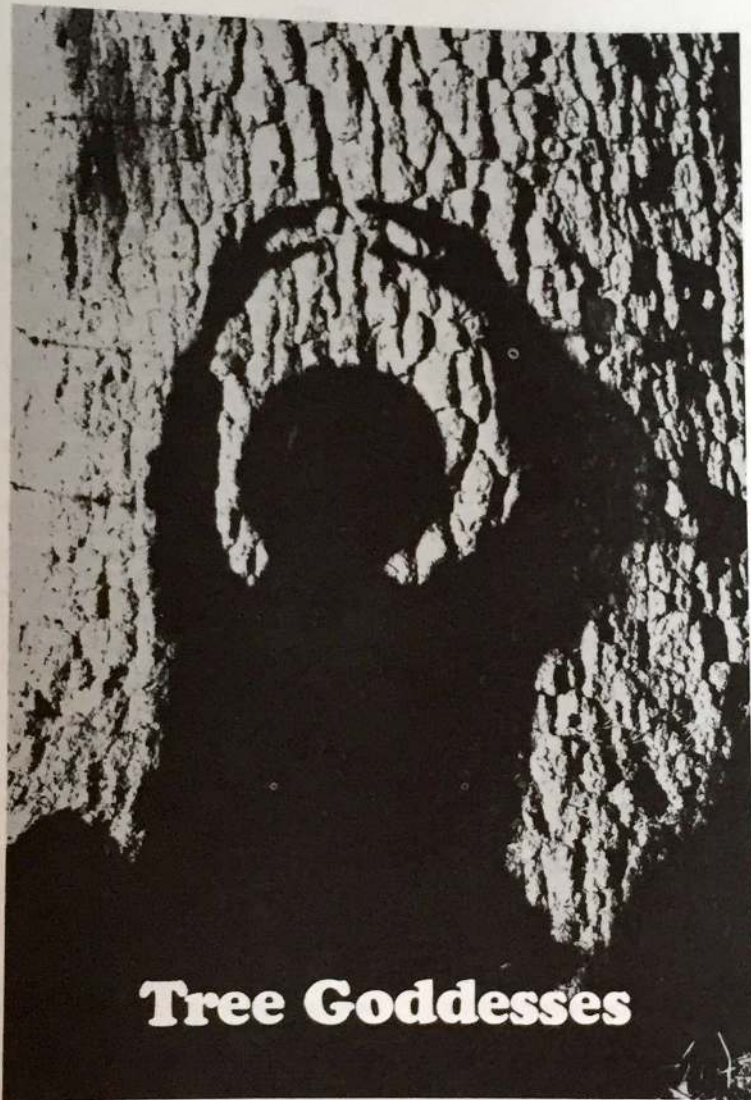


ANIMMA



• FOUR/2
• SPRING
• 1978



Barbara Hammer

Picking up small twigs and constructing triangles and octagonals, rectangles, miniature houses, and sculptures—this is my first memory of contentment. I was about seven and camping with my parents in Yosemite. For hours I found myself transported, listening to an inner meditation—perhaps my own body rhythms—by placing these organic forms, and building with trees. Back home my sister and I dug a trench around the nectarine tree in the backyard and buried our treasures, toy cars, marbles, pick-up sticks, under plucked grass and dirt bridges, each keeping her secret places to herself. Years later at twenty-seven I took an acid trip, and while wandering on the hillside I embraced a fragrant pine. My arms wrapped around the trunk and holding it close, I called her mother. A smaller tree maybe cut for Christmas lay sawed in half beside pine mother, and I picked her up and cradled her, feeling that she was my babe. Now at thirty-seven, a gypsy transient with no mother and no home, my lover takes my arms, placing them around a great, majestic trunk, and whispers, "Feel these strengths in her for you'll have this tree when I and all the rest are gone." So when I go alone to the nearest living thing that does not move and touch the bark and feel the strength of a solid growing plant, I am solaced and renewed. It was natural then to root myself in research on the tree in Jungian psychology, Native American Indian mythology, anthropology, religion, and alchemy.

Three followers of Carl Gustav Jung wrote on the symbol and its meaning. Erich Neumann, who wrote the outstanding book on the mother archetype, *The Great Mother*, gives us the perspective of cultural use in "reading" symbols:

The accent of a symbol depends in a large measure on the matriarchal or patriarchal culture situation in which it is embedded. In a patriarchate, for example, the maternal character of the symbol materia is devaluated; matter is regarded as something of small value in contrast to the ideal—which is assigned to the male-paternal side.¹

It has not always been easy to determine whether the symbol of the tree has been embedded in a patriarchal or in a matriarchal world view. Most shamanistic use of the tree symbol as well as the symbol of the Great Mother seen as the Great World Tree stresses the maternal nature of the tree. In alchemical studies and early gnosticism, on the other hand, the male point of view—ideas about the tree in a conceptual framework—is presented.

The reason for looking at symbols is to tap the unconscious, the dark side of the body/spirit, which lives in dreams and is hard to see in waking life.

The unconscious can be reached and expressed only by symbols, which is the reason why the process of individuation can never do without the symbol. The symbol is the primitive expression of the unconscious, but at the same time it is also an idea corresponding to the highest intuition produced by consciousness.²

"... we mean by symbolic the use of a word that evokes a strong emotional reaction—pointing to a whole complex of ideas that have unusual significance and that also carry the sense of the weight of more than what is known—a quantum of mystery..."³

With an understanding of symbols and the vast associative powers and imagery that surround each one, Jung's description of the tree becomes readily accessible:

Taken on average, the commonest associations to its meaning are growth, life, unfolding of form in a physical and spiritual sense, development, growth from below upwards and from above downwards, the maternal aspect (protection, shade, shelter, nourishing fruits, source of life, solidity, permanence, firm-rootedness, but also being "rooted to the spot," old age, personality, and finally death and rebirth.⁴

I differ with Jung's patriarchal interpretations. Given a world where men shared equally in child-raising and nurturing and where job roles were not sex-determined, the "paternal nature" of the tree could be "protection, shade, shelter, nourishing fruits, source of life" and so on. Such polar divisions rarely fit my experience where I am both nurturer and nourished, transient, unstable mover of the world paths, a homemaker and fire-keeper. The anima/animus divisions of Jungian psychology seem better fitted for linear, conceptual systems thinking than for experiencing and describing life as I know it. The extent of consciousness depends upon the extent that opposites are recognized, according to the Jungians and begins with the archetypal polarity, the extraction of Eve from the body of Adam.

Tree Goddesses

Here, the first step away from the unconscious hermaphrodite is taken with the appearance of two distinct units or opposites. ... Here for the first time the possibility of consciousness occurs ... the two perceive one another ... they have feeling for one another. ...⁵

Before the serpent induces Eve to eat of the Tree of Knowledge and Eve convinces Adam, the innocent two can eat any of the other fruits of the Garden.

But after they had gotten the beginnings of consciousness, a beginning that has no ending while man yet lives, the two were banished from Eden before they could again eat of the Tree of Life and so be immortal. For with both Knowledge and Eternal Life, they would have been like Gods [sic].⁶

As if Eve could ever be a god instead of a goddess, as if consciousness were evil, as if wholeness were heresy. June Singer begins to approach the possibility of one person containing this wholeness within her/him self by going one step back in symbolic connotation and examining the gnostic Tree of Knowledge.

The Serpent of Eden is viewed as a hero instead of a villain because he revealed the secrets of the Tree of Knowledge that Ialdabaoth had jealously guarded from Adam and Eve.

... The God who prohibits eating the fruit of the tree which enables humans to know good and evil may be afraid they will begin to believe that they can become self-suffi-

cient if they can meet their own sexual needs through self-manipulation.⁷

I perceive the tree not to be good or evil, male or female, birth giving or life-taking, but all of these qualities and many more on a continuum that avoids polarities but sees process and a wide diversification of qualities at the same time—closer to a symbol of life. The tree as a symbol of transformation best suits my experience of life. Although Neumann can talk of the ends,

But the tree as house or bearer of fruit is not only evaluated positively as a place of birth; in accordance with the ambivalent structure of the Archetypal Feminine from which it arises, it can also be an abode of death. Into the treetops the dead are hoisted; the tree trunk embraces the corpse as the cedar tree embraced Osiris; the wooden coffin is laid in the earth, here the character of the earth-womb taking the body back into itself is combined with that of the encompassing wood. To this symbolic group belong the variants of the death tree as gallows, as cross, and as stake.⁸

he makes more experiential and poetic sense in talking about the middle,

In perpetual transformation, the humble "rotting" seed lengthens into stalk and sprouting leaves, long stem grows into dense bud, whence the blossom bursts forth in all its diversity and color. And this transformation of form and color, in which the colorless seed unfolds into the green and gold of leaves and thence into the radiant colors of the blossom becomes the concentrated mature fruit, again with its infinite variety of form, color, consistency, taste and smell. This mysterious process begins under the earth and is completed with the help of water in the air, beneath the fire of the sun; it is subject to the influence of invisible forces that early man experienced in earth and water, in the heavenly powers of night and day, in the star, the moon, the sun and their seasonal changes.¹⁰



Jung also writes about process and one gets the sense that his overuse of polarities is for the sake of convenience. It's more difficult to describe change, it is elusive, vaporous, less definitive and hence less given to academic perusal and definition. This in itself hints truth overlooked, but in his description of Gnosis Jung includes a wholistic experience as the basis of knowledge and the words that describe gnosis could be used for the type of feeling/thinking that inspires feminism.

A perception that wells up from the inner experience, a type of perception that is at the same time a vital experience.¹⁰

Jung writing generally shows his magnificent inclusion of knowledge, and my disagreements stand in the light of an overall admiration for his genius.

Gnostic, wisdom, and kabbalistic literature separate in order to define. Rather than continue to rile against this ancient way of thinking it is better to look at the material. As recent studies of the brain have shown, the left side controls linear, rational thought and the right side is responsible for wholistic, artistic understanding. These two sides function together and are mutually interdependent. It is this twosidedness again we find in the *Sefer Yetsirah* or Book of Creation from the *Maaseh Bereshith*. In the final chapter from the Kabbala there is a revelation of ten *Sefiroth* or numbers which originally appear as forms of light that come from one point of light.

Another configuration of the Sefirot conceives of the 10 together as the Tree of Life, with its crown, Kether, in the heavens and its roots in Earth, Malkuth. There, below Kether, the crown, which is the God of creation, are the two attributes: Hokmah (wisdom), the masculine principle, situated on the right, and Binah (understanding or intelligence), the feminine principle, situated on the left. Hokmah and Binah are called "two friends who never part". Their union produces the life energy that sustains the universe. Hokmah is the primal flash of mind, the impregnating seed, while Binah is the vessel in which this seed receives its form. In Hokmah, perception is attained through a quick flash, it is the spark of generation; Binah is expressed as labor and meditation. The intuitive thought of Hokmah is assimilated into Binah where it has the opportunity to develop and grow, and where it may be sheltered until the time is right for it to be brought forth.¹¹

I do not like the gender differentiation of impregnation by the masculine and long labor by the feminine for creation. To propagate such divisionary thinking is to continue the patriarchal philosophy. I contain in me both the inception and the progression of an idea, an act, a love, and neither the beginning nor the continuing can be identified as male or female and make sense.

This wholistic, non-divisionary, non-hierarchical way of thinking goes beyond the patriarchal code in the Bible and the Kabbalah back to the preceding matriarchies when the Goddess was worshipped as the supreme life force.

For an increasing minority of women and even for some men "Goddess" is becoming more functional, meaningful, and loaded with healing associations. . . . It should be noted that women are inclined to speak and write of "The Goddess," whereas one seldom says "The God." The use of the expression, "The Goddess," is a way of confronting this trivialization, of exorcising the male "God," and of affirming a different myth/reality.¹²

To people who fear that the Goddess will take on the same dominating characteristics as "God," Mary Daly answers:

As women who are outside the Christian church inform ourselves of evidence supporting the existence of ancient matriarchy and of evidence indicating that the Gods of patriarchy are indeed contrived, pale derivatives and reversals of the Great Goddess of an earlier period, the fear of mere "crossing" appears less appropriate and perhaps even absurd. There is also less credibility allowable in the notion that "Goddess" would function like "God" in reverse, that is, to legitimate an oppressive "female-dominated" society, if one is inclined to look seriously at evidence that matriarchal society was not structured like patriarchy, that it was non-hierarchical.¹³

The Goddess is often seen earliest and most importantly as an Earth Mother or Tree Goddess and it is this aspect of trees and vegetation I intuitively felt as a child and later as an adult. It is this nurturing, constancy, life-support system of the tree that calls to me.

Tree Goddesses

The Great Earth Mother who brings forth all life from herself is eminently the mother of all vegetation. The fertility rituals and myths of the whole world are based upon this archetypal context. The center of this vegetative symbolism is the tree. As fruit-bearing tree of life it is female: it bears, transforms, nourishes; its leaves, branches, twigs are "contained" in it and dependent on it. The protective character is evident in the tree top that shelters nests and birds. But in addition the tree trunk is a container, "in" which dwells its spirit, as the soul dwells in the body.¹⁴

Some of these spirits of the trees were given names. There is Belili, the Sumerian Tree Goddess most often associated with the willow but also seen as a goddess of wells and springs. Belili was a white Goddess and a predecessor to Ishtar; she was a goddess of trees as well as a Moon-Goddess, Love-Goddess and Underworld-Goddess.¹⁵ Edward Tylor writes that "... direct and absolute tree-worship . . . may indeed lie very wide and deep in the early history of religion."¹⁶ He goes on to recount numerous forms this worship takes: the tree may be the spirit's perch, shelter, or favorite haunt. Wood-fiends can hide in branches and carry off wayfarers. Numberless offerings were hung on trees to abate the spirits—(bread,

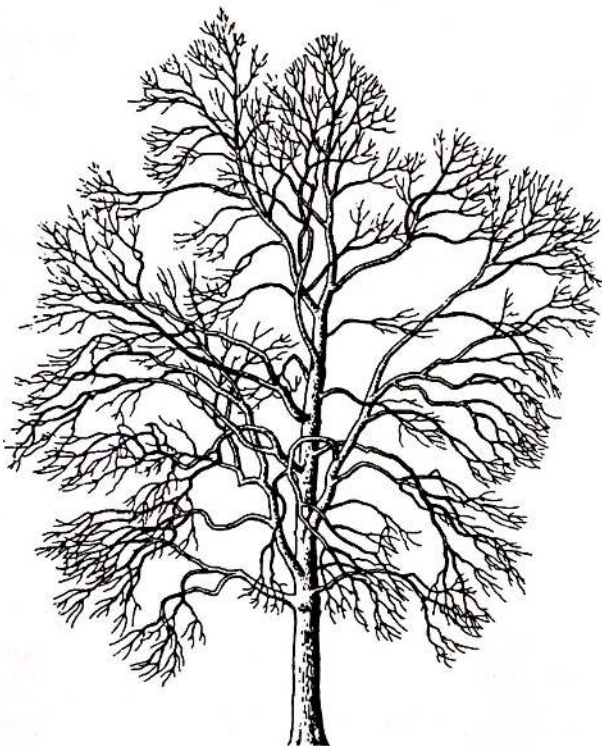
meat, pieces of cloth, thread.) Loud shouts of adoration would be uttered when Indians coming to a horizon view would see their sacred tree.¹⁷ Some Indians would place locks of hair, rags, or receptacles of their diseased friends on a tree, and anyone

passing who touches the object would get the disease and the other would be cured.¹⁸ The Ojibwa medicine man hears a tree utter its complaint when wantonly cut down.¹⁹ Philosophic Buddhism does not include trees among sentient beings

possessing mind, but it does acknowledge a *dew*s or genius of a tree. Buddha was a tree genius in the course of his transmigrations. The sacred Bo Tree is a surviving descendant grown from a branch of the parent tree sent by King Asoka from India to Ceylon in the third century B.C.²⁰ The flowering sal-tree bent down for the mother of the Buddha as "pains of her time overtook her" "like a well-steamed reed," and, grasping it, the young queen, standing, gave birth to her child, who came forth from her right side.²¹

Some wonderful stories about women and trees abound in Indian scriptures. There is one here in an ageless and magical rite whereby to stimulate the vital sap of a tree and cause it to blossom and bear fruit, a young girl in her own blossom time would entwine its trunk, draw down a bough, and deliver with her heel a sharp little kick at the root. These dryads are depicted, then, in the act of arousing in this magical way the trees to which they are attached. In a Mahayana scripture there is a story that the Goddess releases flowers that fall on the bodies of disciples and distinctly do not stick to those who have given up constructural thought and discrimination.

In Greece and Rome trees were thought to be inhabited by a deity and to utter oracles. There is a Homeric hymn to Aphrodite that tells of tree-nymphs, long-lived yet not immortal who grow from leafy pines and oaks until the trees are sapless and the bark rots away, then their spirits depart. A hamadryad's life is bound to her tree, she is hurt when it is wounded, she cries when the axe threatens,



BARBARA HAMMER distributes 16mm films about the goddess as well as feminist poetic films through Goddess Films, P. O. Box 2446, Berkeley CA 94702.

The photograph on page 27 is from "Eggs," a 16mm film on matriarchal symbols by Goddess Films.

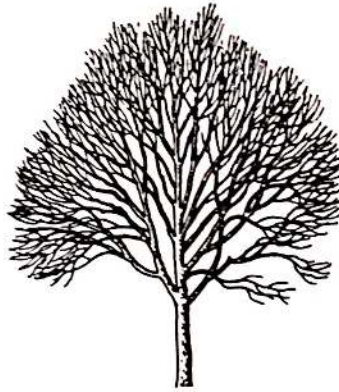
she dies with the fallen trunk. Then there are the transformation myths: Daphne turns to laurel honored by Apollo, the sorrowing sisters of Phaethon change to trees still dropping blood and crying for mercy when their shoots are torn.

Tylor breathes a heavy sign of lament with the advent of Christianity and the demise of animism: With Christianity comes a crusade against the holy trees and groves. Boniface hews down in the presence of the priest the huge oak of the Hessian heaven god and builds of the timber a chapel to St. Peter. But he reminds us that names like Holyoake and Holywood record our own old memories of the holy trees and groves, memories long lingering in the tenacious peasant mind.²² "It is not always our sense of the beautiful that has dwindled, but the old animistic philosophy of nature that is gone from us, dissipating from such fancies their meaning, and with their meaning their loveliness."²³

Shamanism and animism still exist in isolated regions of the world, and it is to these geographical locations relatively untouched by Western civilization that anthropologists such as Eliade turn for their information. Most of his work on sacred trees and shamans stems from the Yakut of North Siberia who live in Yurts. The Yakut believe that at the Golden Navel of the Earth stands a tree with eight branches; it rises in a sort of primordial paradise, for there the first man was born and he feeds on the milk of a woman who half emerges from the trunk of the tree.²⁴ Before birth, the souls of little children perch like birds on the branches of the Cosmic Tree

and the shamans of the Yakuts go there to find them. The Cosmic Tree is essential to the shaman. From its wood he makes his drum; climbing the ritual birch, he effectively reaches the summit of the Cosmic Tree; in front of his yurt and inside it are replicas of the Tree, and he depicts it on his drum.²⁵ Another Yakut legend . . . relates that shamans are born in the north. There a giant fir grows, with nests in its branches: the great shamans are in the highest branches, the middling ones in the middle branches, the least are low in the tree.²⁶

Climbing the magical tree is the heavenly journey of the shaman during which he encounters his heavenly spouse. Her face is half black, half red. Sometimes she appears in the form of a winged tiger. There is also the motif of the ruler of the world who lives in the top of the world-tree and the motif of the giant bird that hatches shamans in the branches of the World Tree.²⁷ The American Indian Pomo tribe also practiced ritual tree climbing.

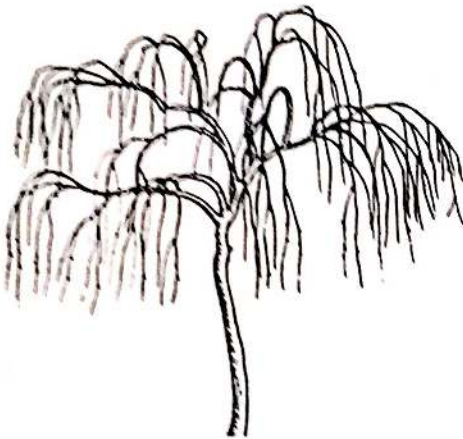


Tree Goddesses

Equally important to the acts of climbing trees, cutting them down, and making objects is the tree planting ceremony. Frank Waters writes of an Indian tribe in southern Mexico who fell a tree, and then replant it. This combines the death and life polarities ascribed to trees.

A tree is felled, its branches tied carefully and bound to the trunk so that not a leaf will touch the ground. After the first few blows of cutting the tree is given a drink of tepache (brandylike) so it won't feel the pain and it is sprinkled with brandy whenever a stop is made. The hole prepared for it is fed with a live chicken, food and brandy. The tree is stripped of branches and the ceremony was staged before El Jajin near Veracruz. The palo volador is planted into the hole to the accompaniment of fireworks and the ringing of church bells. The voladores or fliers ascend the pole and when the musicians play they tie the ends of the four ropes to themselves and fling themselves into space. Four sacred birds they become dressed as eagles dedicated to the sun flying with the four winds to the four sacred directions. Traditionally, each makes 13 revolutions around the pole as the ropes unwind; their total number of flights symbolizes the calendar year of 52 weeks.²⁸

Trees play a significant role in Voodoo religion of Haiti; loa, the souls of the cosmos, may reside in trees but they could never be of the trees.²⁹ Androgyny figures importantly as Legba, the God(dess) of the Crossroads is both man and woman, a vital intersection between two worlds, "the vertical axis of the universe which stretches between sun door and tree root."³⁰



The poteau-mitan, the center post of the peristyle, through which the loa arrive at the ceremony, is also called poteau-Legba; and whatever other sacred tree may be missing, there can be no hounfor (sacred ground where all religious activities take place) without Legba's tree at the gate (there are usually two) for it is not only itself an avenue for Legba, it is the symbol of all avenues as well.³¹

Immediately inside the formal entrance there are usually 2 trees sacred to Legba, as patron of gates, entrances and crossroads, and trees sacred to one or another divinity are profusely scattered throughout the grounds. The bases of these sacred trees—called reposoirs—are usually encircled by clay or cement blocks or troughs.³²

It is interesting that gates, often larger and more overtly dramatic than of practical use, are made throughout the world at entrances to the sacred grounds of the home or the religious site. But in Voodoo the path stretches not from highway to home but from ground to sky.

Particularly are trees the great natural highway of such (communication between worlds) traffic. And the leaves, properly plucked and treated, may therefore carry divine and healing properties. The most ancient of loa are known as loa racine (root loa); the songs tell of their "racine sans but (root without end)." The master of the island below the sea, Grand Bois D'Ilet, is often represented by a branch. And if one or another tree is particularly consecrated to this loa or that, it is not because the loa is the spirit of the tree, it is, rather, in the sense of that tree as a preferred avenue of divine approach. The stylized tree, its branches and roots symmetrically extended to both sides of an horizon, is signaled, over and over in the vevers. As center-post—poteau-mitan—this same vertical avenue axis of the metaphysical cosmos, is built into the very center of the peristyle, the ceremonial movements and the dance; at its base the offerings are placed; and through it the loa enter the peristyle.³³

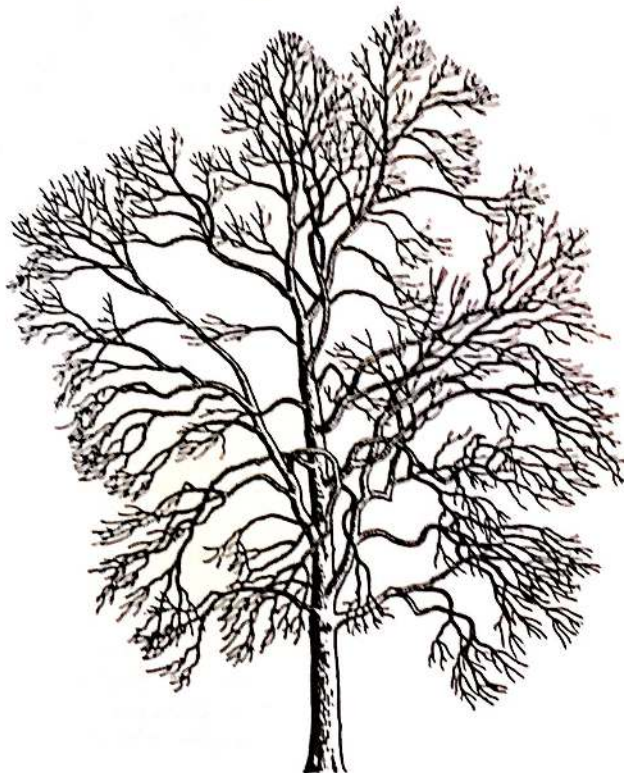
In Druidic tradition trees and letters of the alphabet are intermixed so that vegetation and intelligence could be combined. These same trees were capable of being transformed into warriors and sent into battle, a battle fought intellectually in the heads and with the tongues of the learned.

... In all Celtic languages *trees* means *letters*, so that the Druidic colleges were founded in woods or groves; that a great part of the Druidic mysteries was concerned with twigs of different sorts; and that the most ancient Irish alphabet, the Beth-Luis-Nion (Birch-Rowan-Ash) takes its name from the first three of a series of trees whose initials form the sequence of its letters.³⁴



NOTES

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