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## TREE-WORSHIP IN ROMANIAN LANDSCAPE

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**Abstract:** Tree worship and the preservation of certain components of Romanian dendrology and flora. Tree worship is the most evolved stage of botanical mythology. It defines the vegetal conception over world and life, conception manifested by the worship of sacred trees, as protean and demiurge deities.

These types of trees acted in the Romanian peasant's imagination under the shape of deities which could predict, could help or punish the people. Thus, the fir tree, the oak, the poplar, the willow, the apple tree started to be protected by profane laws for their material value and by the sacred laws, for their mythological value. Traces of sacred tree worship are varied and numerous in Romanian traditional culture. Thus, the fir, oak, beech, lime, willow or apple are present in all the passage rites: birth, marriage and funeral. To illustrate the importance of the sacred trees in Romanian traditional mentality, we will appeal to a carol in Transylvanian repertoire that brings Virgin Mary to the stage together with two trees: the poplar and the fir. The fir worshipping – sacred tree by excellence to Romanians – was materialized, in this carol that enjoyed an intense circulation in Transylvania. This folk creation sustains the idea referring to an ancient cult of the fir in Romanian area.

### Introduction

Tree-worshipping represents the most advanced stage of botanical mythology and it materializes in the worshipping of the sacred trees, thus defining a novel conception upon the world. Trees were worshiped either as divinities or as metamorphosed forms of the gods.

The Carpathian-Balkan mythology evokes the beauty of a Europe covered by woods. Hence resulted a true cult of the trees, based on their general function in the material life of the people and on their special function linked to the spiritual life of the inhabitants of a world vegetal in its essence. Thus, a complex tree-worshipping was developed gradually. The most useful trees were considered sacred and hence a true code of unwritten laws appeared, that is: profane laws, for the material value of the trees and sacred laws for their mythological value.

The major themes of dendrolatry (tree-worshipping) can be condensed in three great tree representations: the cosmic tree, the heavenly tree and the life tree.

In Romanian landscape, the fir-tree is the only tree that appears in all the three hypostases, and not only these: it is the cosmic tree, the heavenly tree, the life tree but also of the death, of the luck etc. The fir is a symbol of life in all its aspects, not missing any of the ceremonial and ritual manifestations of the Romanian traditional communities. Birth, wedding or burial, are the major moments where the fir is a "participant" with a well-defined and unreplaceable part.

### Argument

Achieving the function of integrating man into cosmos, the fir (*Abies alba*) is for Romanians a tree for birth, for wedding, for trial, funerary, and for alms (charity). Thus at a child birth, this was symbolically united with the fir; at wedding, the fir becomes the flag of the bridegroom, having an important role over the ritual; at death of an unwed lad, the flag of the dead is made of a fir, being put on the grave and furnished like the wedding flag. At the dead alms, the fir is loaded with fruits and sweets that are after given to the children for the soul of the dead. We won't get into detail as these aspects have already constituted the object of another paper [3].

We only wish to highlight the idea that all these suppose the existence of an ancient cult of the fir-tree at Romanians. For this theory pleads also a series of testimonies upon the so-called “confession to the fir-tree”, recorded in Marginimea Sibiului and in Vrancea Mountains [1]. According to the material recorded in the mentioned areas, the shepherds “were confessing to the trees, especially to the firs” sustaining that this confession is “better than the one done in front of a priest”.

Further on to illustrate the importance of the sacred trees in Romanian traditional mentality, we will appeal to a carol in Transylvanian repertoire that brings Virgin Mary to the stage together with two trees: the poplar (*Populus tremula*) and the fir.

The text of the carol presents the Virgin Mary with her hair disheveled with the belt untied looking for a place favorable to the birth of the holy child. The first stop is next to a tree that is completely hostile and doesn't bend the branches to offer shadow to the Virgin Mary. After she curses it, the Virgin Mary starts again on the road and stops next to another tree that is benevolent and protect the birth of the Holy Son.

The malevolent tree is in majority of variants, cursed to tremble its leaves forever, or to dry, and the good tree receives as gift the quality of having the leaves green for ever.

The carol described here can be compared with the etiological legends that speak about the origin of some plants or animals and about their features as a result of a divine punishment or reward.

In the carol mentioned above, the cursed tree is the poplar and the blessed one is the fir. One of the most visible oppositions seems to be the one between the falling leaves of the poplar and the endless green of the fir. The text of the carol supports this opposition through the description of the way of the Virgin Mary, road that goes up from the bottom of the mountain to the top of it. In other words, the encounter with the poplar took part somewhere down, in the valley and the good fir would appear only at the top of the mountain. The Virgin Mary should reach this area of the fir, area of major importance in Romanian landscape for the life and economy of the traditional community.

As Herșeni shows, the fir wood is “*the best place, we may say the central area of shepherding, where the milk sheep shelter and feed. The fir wood has, as shepherds from Fagarasului Mountains say, “the best and safe graze, it is the warmest place”* [1], sheep being here protected by rains and winds.

Virgin Mary must have reached this welcoming area to give birth to the Holy Son, safely. We remark once again the importance of fir to Romanians, even through this investment in the quoted carol, with an important role in the miracle of the Holy Child's birth.

The fir worshipping – sacred tree by excellence to Romanians – was materialized, as we have seen, in this carol that enjoyed an intense circulation in Transylvania. This folk creation sustains the idea referring to an ancient cult of the fir in Romanian area. Over this cult, the Christian elements were superposed in the case of the mentioned carol, whose importance we do not deny in developing the folk text studied. Besides, the metaphoric use of the tree and the symbolism of the tree, that take part of the images of the Christian religion, was folded and merged with the old forms of dendrolatry (tree-worshipping), that was present in Romanian area since pre-Christian times. We return here to the testimonies of the shepherds in Mărginimea Sibiului, that assert the antiquity of Romanian dendrolatry; thus they not only confessed to the fir but also received the eucharist with fir buds, fact considered to be better than the church one.

Along the time, the Christian religion succeeded not only in destroying the pre-Christian religions, but also to fill the old patterns of dendrolatry, for example, with new, symbols, alike, that pleased both the archaic beliefs and the new religion of people. These symbols are, for example the antithetical couples: the good tree – the bad tree, the green tree – the dried tree, couples that symbolize in Christian literature, the destiny of good peoples compared to the sinful people, and in the Christian ethics the reminded images describe the antithesis between the

reward for the good acts and punishment for the evil deeds or the opposition between redemption and damnation, between heaven and hell etc.

In Romanian Iconographic tradition we also find many reminiscences of tree-worshipping. As an example we remind a series of icons where the Virgin Mary and the Holy Son are painted on a background divided in two: one side is represented by green trees and the other one by an arid landscape with dried trees. We have here the same reference as in the carol about the birth of the Holy Son, where the green trees represent blessing and the dried ones, the curse.

The vegetal world and especially the trees have represented for people a way of integration into the landscape, into nature, from the ancient times. That is why there always has been a kind of parallelism between the human destiny and the tree one. In the mentality of the traditional Romanian village this cult of the trees was deeply rooted. Christianity just resemantized these pre-Christian beliefs and in the folk creations, resulted following this dynamic process we could discover both the ancient beliefs of the village community and the new Christian symbols [1].

In Romanian landscape, the fir appears as we said, as being by excellence the sacred tree and also a symbol of youth, wedding and immortality. Nevertheless it is not the only tree considered to be sacred by the inhabitants of this region. The Romanian landscape is full of these trees made sacral, each one having its legend and being protected in consequence. We remind here only few of the other trees considered to be sacred on Romanian territory: the oak (*Quercus robur*), the willow (*Salix* sp.), the walnut (*Juglans regia*), the hazelnut (*Corylus avellana*), the beech (*Fagus sylvatica*), the apple (*Malus pumila*), the cherry (*Prunus avium*) and others.

We will discuss a little about each of them.

The oak tree is together with the fir, one of the most important sacred trees for Romanians. Its wood is invested with magical features owed to the supreme gods under whose protection it stands. To ancient Greeks the oak was considered to be Zeus' tree and in Rome it was the tree dedicated to Jupiter the Capitoline. For Romanian mentality it represented the heavenly tree, a true *axis mundi* that made the connection between the underworld, the terrestrial and celestial ones. Thus the place where an oak grew was considered sacred and those who stayed there could communicate with the other worlds. For Romanians, oak also symbolizes permanence, continuity and resistance in front of any kind of weathers. That is why the oak from Borzesti or the common oak of Horea, were the places where some important events for the history of our people developed.

The willow enjoys a unique representation in the Romanian mythical-symbolical dendrolatry. It is a tree with a special feminine symbolism. It is associated to the principle of growing and fertility owing to its extraordinary vitality. The willow was associated to woman in the folklore of different peoples for the beauty, lithe and elasticity of the branch. At Romanians, the hallowed willow branches are invested with magical, miraculous powers, stimulating love and fertility to humans.

The walnut was considered in our cultural area a sacred tree, too, though it appears for many times as having a demonical connotation, in the sense that people would not have a walnut in the yard, as under the walnut nothing else grows. This ill-fated symbolism is counteracted through its fruit, the walnuts being the symbol of fecundity and fertility. A series of European peoples give the walnut a funerary character, as walnuts are used as offerings to the dead.

The hazelnut is also a sacred tree in Romanian folk culture, being given miraculous properties. Its magical functions are linked especially by the hazelnut twig (rod), with which it was thought that the treasures hidden in the ground can be found or the witches' witchcraft can be undone.

And as all these trees and many others we haven't mentioned could be, separately, the object of study for a detailed research I will end here hoping that Romanian dendrolatry will

reborn in the hearts of those who should protect one of the most precious of our wealth: nature in general and woods in particular [3].

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#### DENDROLATRIA ÎN PEISAJUL ROMÂNESC

##### (Rezumat)

Cea mai evoluată treaptă a mitologiei botanice este dendrolatria. Ea definește concepția vegetală asupra vieții și lumii, concretizându-se în adorarea arborilor sacri. Din materialele analizate, bradul ne apare ca fiind cel mai semnificativ totem arboreol de pe teritoriul țării noastre.

Tăierea nerituală sau degradarea arborilor considerați sacri erau pedepsite cu sancțiuni drastice. În aceste condiții, bradul, stejarul, plopul, salcia și alți arbori sălbatici sau cultivați au fost protejați de legi profane, pentru valoarea lor materială și de legi sacre pentru valoarea lor mitologică. Pentru ilustrarea importanței arborilor sacri pentru mentalitatea românească tradițională am ales o colindă din repertoriul transilvănean, care aduce în scenă imaginea Fecioarei Maria, alături de doi arbori: plopul și bradul. Colinda aleasă susține ideea existenței unui vechi cult al bradului pe teritoriul țării noastre și, prin urmare, a adorării bradului, ca arbore sacru prin excelență la români. Bradul nu este, însă, singurul arbore sacralizat. Peisajul românesc este încărcat de arbori sacralizați, fiecare dintre ei avându-și propria legendă și fiind protejat în consecință. Am amintit în lucrarea noastră doar câțiva dintre arborii sacralizați pe teritoriul țării noastre: stejarul, salcia, nukul, alunul, fagul, mărul, cireșul și alții. Vestigiile acestor arbori reflectă, de fapt, figurarea arborelui cosmic, a arborelui ceresc și a arborelui vieții.