

# Cultural Aspects of Trees: Traditions & Myths

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From the earliest human writings and myths, trees have represented the power and mystery of nature. Large, ancient trees seemed immortal, demanding respect and reverence. They could bare huge crops of seed and grow forests full of their own offspring. When struck by lightning or set aflame, trees, even in death, were creatures of worship, awe, and fear - the homes of gods.

Every part of the globe has a myth about this "godliness." From the oak in central Europe, ash in Scandinavia, and *Shorea* in India, trees were revered. Many early peoples thought that spirits of their ancestors lived in trees. They cultivated and protected holy trees and would beg forgiveness from a tree if it was cut. Some believed that souls of unborn babies lived in trees until birth. In Korea, spirits of women who died in childbirth were thought to live in trees.

Other groups of people considered trees closely bound with their own creation. Greeks believed the first man was made from an ash tree. In Siberia, man and woman were thought to have been created separately from a larch and a fir. Scandinavian myths state that gods breathed life into two tree trunks to make the first human couple. Other northern Europeans believed man was first carved

from an alder. In Indonesia, vertical slices cut into a fig tree by two gods created man, while horizontal slices created woman. In New Guinea, man was considered a tree that moved!

Some trees were well known for their special attributes. In many areas, birch was the tree of health, wisdom, and safety, was used in baby cradles and cribs, and was used as symbols of public office. Cedars were the trees of paradise in the mid-East. They were also symbols of faithful lovers in China and held as sacred in Nepal. Junipers were planted as protection from thieves and witches. Mountain-ash twigs were tied into knots to prevent witchcraft. Ash was considered a tree of rebirth and planted as protection against evil creatures. Pine, acacia, white cedar, catalpa, and chestnut trees were planted in specific spots for specific gods around Chinese temples. Hazels were considered protection against lightning.

Our common trees were highly revered. Willows, for example, were the trees of sorrow. In colder climates, they were substituted for palms during Palm Sunday observances. Oaks were the symbols of strength and power. Many oak cults, like the Druids, existed. In China, pine was the symbol of friendship in adversity since it remains green all year.

Even ways of life and death have been associated with particular trees. Tree planting, for example, was considered an investment in life. In Germany, it was customary to plant a tree at a wedding. As each child arrived, an apple tree was planted for every boy and a pear for each girl. The longevity and fruitfulness of the trees were thought to give strength to the marriage and children. Marco Polo said that the Khan had many trees planted because "he who plants a tree will live a long life."

Tree symbols could also be seen in warfare. In China, conquerors would cut down holy forests rather than tearing down temples, as a supreme symbol of conquest. Many weapons were made of wood from special trees in the hope that the strength of the tree would reside in them.

Trees remain strong symbols today. Companies and organizations use trees as part of their corporate logos and as names for real estate developments. Trees are planted, specific woods used, and tree symbols developed that are not in proper biological contexts, but symbolize the positive, long-lived, and strong emotional imagery trees present.

Our traditions of living with trees continue today. From our backyards, to the name of streets and shopping centers -- trees and tree symbols surround us. What will become the tree myths and traditions of our age? Tree use traditions of the past and present are listed below in Table 1.

**Table 1: The cultural history, meaning, symbolism, or significance of selected trees across a number of communities and cultures.**

Acacia -- Wood for the ark of the Covenant, altar of the Tabernacle, and crown of Christ. One of four primary trees of the gods in China, and sacred to Buddhists and Hindus.
Alder -- Forest green cloth dye of forest workers and outlaws, and from which humans were first carved into life.
Almond -- Biblical staff of Aaron, and staff of the Pope.
Apple -- A tree of paradise and a male baby's birth tree.
Ash -- Cupid's arrows, protection from evil creatures, and tree of rebirth.
Beech -- Ships (like the Argo of Greek myth) and wine bowls.
Birch -- Symbol of health, wisdom, safety, public office, inception, and consolidated power. Used for baby furniture.
Boxwood -- Branches used for celebrating the feast of the Tabernacle and Easter, containers for precious things, and substitute for Palm Sunday palm fronds.
Catalpa -- One of four primary trees of the gods in China.
Cedar -- Trees of paradise, good fortune and faithful lovers.
Chestnut -- Provider of food, and a temple tree in China.
Cypress -- Tree of mourning, coffins, churches, and Noah's ark.
Dogwood -- The wood of spear and arrows.
Elder -- Tree of protective female household gods.
Elm -- Tree of sleep.
Fig -- Tree of wisdom, of mythical bridges, and of creation.
Fir -- The Christmas tree and the tree of woman's creation in Siberia.
Hawthorn -- An unlucky tree, tree of enforced chastity and female scent.
Hazel -- Container of wisdom and divination, and protection against lightning.
Hemlock -- One of four primary trees of the gods in China.
Holly -- Holy, white wood.
Juniper -- Protection against thieves, witches and evil.
Larch -- Tree of ships, bridges, and of the creation of man in Siberia.
Laurel -- Protection from illness.
Mango -- Tree of immortality.
Maple -- The emblem of reserve.
Mountain-Ash -- Protection against witches and lightning.
Oak -- Tree of strength, seat of the chair of St. Peter in the Vatican, tree of worship, and power.
Olive -- Tree of security and peace.
Pear -- Tree of female baby's birth.
Persimmon -- Chairs of the gods.
Pine -- Tree of friendship, friendship in adversity, and one of four primary trees of the gods in China
Poplar -- Talking or singing tree.
Sycamore -- Tree of protection and favors.
Walnut -- Royal tree and tree of prophesy.
Willow -- Tree of tears and sorrow, tree of enchantment, and a substitute for Palm Sunday palm fronds.
Yew -- Tree of the dead, and bow wood.

Primary Source:

Wassink, J.T. 1974. The Man-Wood Relationship. Communication #68. Department of Agricultural Research of the Royal Tropical Institute, Amsterdam, The Netherlands. pp. 69.