

## COMMENTARY

# Mystical Nature

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**J**UST mention trees and most people are drawn to two points of thought, the first being how they contribute to the environment and humanity's existence and secondly how humans are destroying them and their habitat. But trees have played a long and vital role in mythology for millennia. They were often associated with being ancestors, gods or possessing super-

natural powers.

A common example is that old saying, "touch wood" when we are talking about an event like taking it for granted that it will work out in our favour or to our advantage.

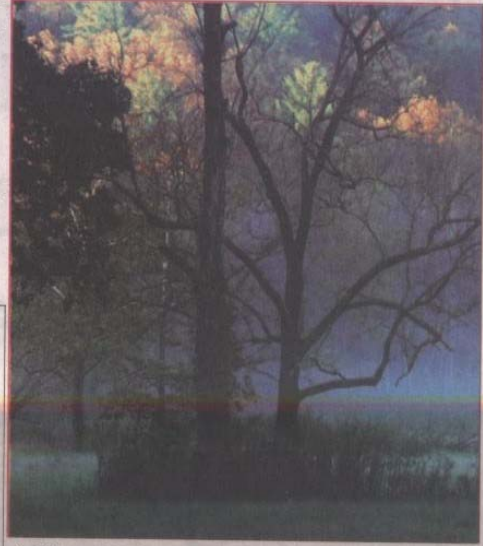
This may be reminiscent of ancient practices where touching wood was taken as a sign of respect to the trees and the spirits that inhabited them, hence by touching wood, one was able to ward off evil spirits and bad luck and that the venture they are talking about will not meet with misfortune.

Trees have been featured

and appeared to be highly regarded in many ancient civilisations such as the Greeks, which included them in paintings and pottery.

The Druids also believed that trees possessed great powers such as the Oak. Another tree is the Ash, which appeared in Norse mythology. The Egyptian Book of the Dead mentions Sycamore trees as part of the landscape where the souls of the deceased find rest.

As bearers of fruit and providers of shade, trees have been associated with



fertility and life. Take for instance evergreens, which became symbols of undying life since they remained green throughout the year. While deciduous trees, which lose their leaves around winter and produce new ones in spring became regarded as a symbol of rebirth after death, renewal or immortality.

Because of these qualities it comes as no surprise that many cultures also believe in a Tree of Life, which in Norse mythology the tree runs like a pole connecting the world and the realms above and below.

They referred to their World Tree as Yggdrasil.

It was believed that the tree nourished humans, animals and gods, and connected all living things in all phases of existence. The Greeks also believed that the Earth is supported by a tree.

The Peepal (*Ficus religiosa*), also commonly known as the Buddha tree is a large tree native to India with leaves possessing long drip tips.

It is regarded as sacred as Buddha was supposed to have received enlightenment under one.

Some mythical trees were guarded by animals such as that spoken of in Persian mythology where their version of the Tree of Life is guarded by a dragon. The strategy of trees using animals to keep them safe is one that actually occurs in nature,

for example, the Cecropia (*Cecropia peltata*) which is found in this country and whose hollow trunk is home to ants.

It is also believed that some trees are the homes of spirits. This is the case with our Silk Cotton tree (*Ceiba pentandra*). This is a deciduous tree that can reach heights of over 24 metres with characteristic buttress roots, which can be up to 3 metres in height and in length, the latter being the distance it extends from the trunk.

In Jamaica, in addition to Silk Cotton trees it is believed that spirits also live in Almond trees. However, Silk Cotton trees are the national tree of Guatemala and were considered sacred by the Ancient Mayas who believed that history began with this tree and it is from this tree that "the first man was born".

The final and to me, the most famous tree is the Christmas tree, which is usually a conifer. However, I will not be going into much detail this week as the Christmas season is approaching, so I will look at them exclusively in a future article.

I am sure after reading this it is clear that the presence of trees in myths and legends throughout history in both a good and bad context has led to their protection from humans.

It just goes to show you that if we fear or respect something we will protect it even if it simply means leaving it alone.