Tree worship is the
result of our reverence
for a creation of nature
that provides us food
and fodder, write
NANDITHA KRISHNA
and
M AMIRTHALINGAM

By conferring sanctity
on trees, ancient peo-
ple indicated their ap-
preciation of their so-
cio-economic-medici-
nal role. To please the
gods and spirits residing in the
trees, the trees themselves were wor-
shipped. Tree worship is the most
prevalent form of worship all over
the world. The Roman forest king' was
the personification of the spirit of
the sacred tree, the oak, his living
dual. The oak worship of the Druids
is familiar. The Celts worshipped Jupiter
in the form of a tall oak tree.

An ancient sanctuary still exists
in the name of Nemii in Italy, which
comes from the Greek and Latin
nimos/nemus, 'a forest enclosing
pastures, groves and a group of trees con-
sidered to be sacred'. Sacred groves
were common among Germans and
the oldest sanctuaries were natural
woods. Ancient Greeks respected the
spirit of conservation by Goddess
Artemis, protectress of wildlife and
the wilderness.

Sacred Groves

Sacred trees and groves have been
reported from Africa since pre-agri-
cultural, hunting and gathering soci-
eties, when human societies were in
primitive states. The mignon tree in
the groves is sacred to the Kikuyu tribe.
Cutting of trees, breaking branches, col-
lection of firewood, burning of grass,
and grazing and hunting of wild ani-
mall within the groves are strictly
prohibited. There are about 200 sacred
groves in the Kikuyu district of Kenya,
and these are protected by the Kikuyus.
The colonial administration has listed
over 100 sacred groves, where cut-
ing of trees is taboo among the Mbeere
tribe of eastern Africa.

Sacred groves and forests still sur-
vive throughout Ethiopia; Orthodox
Christians, Muslims, and local ethnic
groups, with their traditional belief sys-
tems, protect these groves. The Or-
ono begin the harvesting season with
a thanksgiving festival called Erreessa,
which takes place under big trees in a
sacred grove. The Gurage and Amhara
also have their ceremony called Ad-
bar, which takes place each year un-
der big trees on community lands.

Sacred groves occur throughout
Ghana. In northern Ghana, patches of
woody vegetation are conserved by
communities for ritual purposes. In
north-eastern Ghana, about 179 groves
have been reported. The sacred groves
and their communal features are re-
sponsible for the cultural estrangements

Object Of
DEVOTION

The Roman ‘forest king’ was
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of the Tiriki people. In Kena, the sa-
cred groves are known as Kaya forests.

In Timor, rock and tree forms are
symbolic cultural structures. In West
Timor, among the Mbo-speaking
communities, their description for their
indigenous religion is the ‘sacred tree
and the sacred rock’. The Egyptians
were also known to worship trees.
The tamarisk played an important role in
the legend of Isis and Osiris. The Nor-
wegian maple that shaded the tomb of
Osiris on the banks of the Nile was
also considered divine.

In Persian mythology, the gogad
or ghokrenna tree bears the haorna,
which gives health and generative power
and imparts life at the time of res-
urrection. The white haoma, the tree
of life that grows in paradise, was the

the 'Nemen' of the Antideae. The lau-
el at Delphi was as celebrated as
Dodona’s oak.

Romulus killed Acron, king of
Cecina, and hung the rich spoils or
prizes on an ancient oak, which had
been considered sacred by the shep-
derers, on Capitoline Hill. Another im-
portant god in Roman history is Mars,
originally the god of vegetation and
fertility. Among the plants and trees
dedicated to Mars were fig, oak, lau-
el, and oriental hornbeam plant. The
people of Judea vener-
nated natural groves
too. They wor-
shipped groves or
ashen that, often repre-
sented as an emblem
on Assyrian sculp-
tures, an artificial
tree. Worship of the
ashen was a form of tree
tree worship, beckoned upon by the priest of the Jewish
religion.

Tree Of Immortality

In the Genesis story of creation,
found in both the Jewish Torah and
the biblical Old Testament, the Tree
of Knowledge (of good and evil) and the
Tree of Immortality were situated in
the Garden of Eden.

Ancient Germans believed that
they were the offspring of their sacred
trees and forests. They had no images
and declined to enclose their gods
within walls, but consecrated groves
and woods in the names of their gods.
The Christmas tree, so common to the
whole Christian world, is a remnant of
the tree worship of their ancestors.

Uppsala in Scandinavia existed in
front of a great temple where grew a
huge tree of unknown origin, that
spread with large boughs, and was
green both during summer and win-
ter; near the same temple was a sacred
grove. There are several recorded in-
stances of tree worship in America. A
huge cypress was hung all over with
votive offerings, besides hundreds of
locks of hair, teeth, and bits of ribbon.
Abridged from Sacred Plants of India,
Penguin Books India.

SACRED FAUNA

Squirrel

The squirrel belongs to the rodent family. There are over 265 species of squirrels worldwide. The smallest is the 10-cm-long African pygmy squirrel and the largest is the massive three-feet-long Indian giant squirrel. According to Norse mythology, Raistoksa is a squirrel that carries the wise words of Yggdrasil, the tree of life, to its three roots where the gods hold their meeting. The roots represent the past, present and future. The squirrel is the native American symbol for preparation, trust and thriftiness. Squirrels are also used as clan animals. The

animal is praised for its industrious
food-gathering habit and courage.

Some tribes hold squirrels as
caretakers of the forest, because they
bring warnings of danger to the
people. The animal is associated with
practicality. As the squirrel is known
to hide and save its food and return to it in winter months, anthropologists who specialize in
symbolism, take this as a sign that we
too must take stock of our own
provisions from time to time.

Squirrels are quite sociable, and are
ten seen in pairs or groups. They
are social creatures as well. A squirrel
communicates extensively when in
play or when it feels threatened.

These traits address our ability to
express ourselves in social settings.

The squirrel reminds us to
communicate effectively with others,
and also to honour those around us.

International Day of Forests and the Tree