

Mics: The sacral significance of forests and trees – [Mics: Erdők és fák szakrális jelentősége]

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THE SACRAL SIGNIFICANCE OF FORESTS AND TREES IN THE RELIGIONS, PHILOSOPHIES, AND SPIRITUALITY

[AZ ERDŐK ÉS A FÁK SZAKRÁLIS JELENTŐSÉGE A VALLÁSOKBAN, EGYES FILOZÓFIAI RENDSZEREKBE ÉS A SPIRITUALITÁS MÁS FORMÁIBAN]

MICS, FERENC

(ORCID ID: 0009-0007-4528-1538)

*Research Institute of Multidisciplinary Ecotheology, John Wesley Theological College, Budapest
e-mail: micsferi@gmail.com*

Abstract. The immense stature and enduring lifespan of trees and forests have undeniably left a profound impact on the creative minds of preliterate societies. It is evident that these natural wonders have captivated the imagination of early civilizations, influencing their beliefs, traditions, and cultural expressions. Throughout the globe, various religious groups have preserved sacred forests and groves, which are ancient wooded areas believed to be the dwelling places of the spiritual or divine entities, for many generations. Numerous sacred forests have endured throughout various regions of the world. These include the church forests found in the highlands of Ethiopia, the hillside groves that hold great significance for Catholics in Italy, the woodlands that are deeply revered by Shinto practitioners in Japan, as well as the forests that hold sacred value for Indigenous communities in Siberia, Australia, the Americas, and India. Protected woodlands serve as valuable repositories of biodiversity, acting as crucial sanctuaries for various plant and animal species that are scarce or have disappeared in other parts of the region. The preservation of these sacred spaces is being challenged by climate change, pollution, and urbanization. Throughout the years, devoted caretakers, environmentalists, and governments have taken on the responsibility of safeguarding these areas, but now there is a growing effort to enhance their protection.

Keywords: groves, mythology, church, environment, biodiversity

Introduction

In the perspective of organized religions as well as the animistic belief system, anything that is breathtaking is seen as "sacred." Temples, monasteries, natural rock formations, rock carvings, and other man-made structures in the shape of "stupas," or pillars, as in the Hindu and Buddhist traditions, are examples of sacred sites. Sacred sites can also result from mythological beliefs and stories woven around a particular landscape. In any case, delving deeper into this belief system may reveal a wealth of benefits that society is looking for, both tangibles that meet their basic needs and intangibles that frequently have an impact on spiritual and psychological levels, both of which add to the greater welfare of humanity. As a result, the scientific community faces a difficulty in trying to give significance to what may at first glance appear to be simple belief systems and connect them to the process of making decisions in the

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modern context of nature-culture interactions (Harvey, 2009). The evolution of world faiths has always been significantly influenced by nature. Yes, the natural world served as early humans' temple. The spatial distribution of cultural centers in respect to many aspects of the natural environment is examined by the field of geography of religion. This includes the natural circumstances that led to the creation of every given location as well as its geographic reasons. This kind of study focuses on either more extensive geographical systems like mountain ranges, catchment areas, or coastal stretches, or more solitary features like caves, rivers, and mountain peaks. The imagination of preliterate tribes was greatly influenced by trees and forests, most likely due to their enormous size and occasionally lengthy lifespan. Like people and animals, they were alive, but they were static; like mountains and stones, they might change and swing but also remained in one position. Maybe dense woodlands looked enigmatic. If a lone tree had fed a famished traveler, especially in a desolate area, it may have seemed magical. The earliest humans saw and felt trees; they used them for clothes, fencing, barriers, food, fuel, and weapons like spears and lances; they burnt, chopped, or were somehow changed into a variety of objects. People on both sides of the law may hide, conceal, and find cover from their shadows. In the minds of people residing in several geographic regions, woods and certain tree species have come to symbolize diverse ideas throughout time. The abundance or scarcity of trees in a particular area shaped the way they were viewed and handled in myths, tales, and cultures. According to some theories, archaic tribes may have developed the belief that the gods lived in both the sky and the earth after observing trees hit by lightning and incinerated in the ensuing fire (Buell, 1999). There is conjecture that the belief that the gods lived in both the land and the sky originated when prehistoric tribes saw trees struck by lightning and destroyed in the ensuing fire (Pungetti et al., 2012). Societies are thought to stabilize relationships between humans and nature by distributing human activities in relation to the forest or the spatial distribution of forest vegetation. A landscape may "feel right" or it may not. Even if it puts regular low in hazard, there is a customary basis for altering the normally when anything doesn't feel right (Dewsbury and Cloke, 2009). The idea that nature is sacred serves as both a foundation for rationalizing seen and/or experienced natural events and an anchor for explaining order in what may otherwise appear to be a chaotic world. "Sacredness" is a belief system that is universal in that it has spread independently over time throughout diverse regions of the world and has become ingrained in both organized and animistic faiths. Animistic communities eventually assimilated into structured religious belief systems, which led to a continuous evolution of the concept of sanctity along a temporal gradient finding expression in a multitude of forms over the years (Dudley et al., 2010). Sacredness, after all, is essentially the perception of nature and its resources through the lens of "intangible" psychological values, which are frequently translated into "tangible" advantages that allow for the sustainable

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management of natural resources (Holland, 2012). Even so, religious categorization is nevertheless viewed as an intriguing anachronism and a particularly persistent cause of institutional inequality. Religious categorizations have a strong and pervasive influence on how people view, manage, and utilize forests. Classifications of forests reflect value systems that distinguish land according to its respective merits and uses. Religious classification standards diverge from state legal, economic, and ecological norms. They categorize woods according to the symbolic demands that individuals feel they meet. They do so from a viewpoint that frequently conflicts with the state's secular authority, whether it be local or otherwise (Chandrakanth and Romm, 1991). Religious beliefs about forests affect where, why, and what kinds of trees people plant, preserve, and harvest. Nonetheless, public policies are typically formulated with the assumption that public interests should be adequately served by recognition of and effect upon secular motives alone. While this pattern makes sense in cases where governments adhere to secular values, it may not always serve the public good in situations where individuals are motivated primarily by religious beliefs. Religious trees represent a variety of human circumstances, opportunities, and expectations. In India, certain tree species are revered as gods' incarnations, as proxies for specific stars and planets, and as representations of the elements - energy, water, land, and air - each with distinct and interconnected connotations. Religious trees influence human behavior by serving as sources of societal cohesiveness, continuity, and control. Sacred groves are areas of forest vegetation that have been set aside for spiritual or ethical purposes. They could serve as a living representation of ancestors, pay respect to a god, shield a hallowed location from harm, or give a haven for spirits. They could or might not have creatures that practice individual religion. Depending on the area's past culture, sacred groves in India can fulfill any or all of these purposes. Despite being widespread in southern and southeast Asia, little is known about sacred groves outside of India and their close surroundings. Because of their increased visibility among the surrounding forest clearings, they have only recently come to the notice of many people. The sharp contrast makes those who work with technicians to stop deforestation seem less intelligent (Khan et al., 2008). Temple woodlands are maintained to support the temple's ceremonial and institutional needs. If the temple requires the woodlands to remain natural, then they may be preserved. In the event that the temple need funds or supplies, they can be administered for strictly commercial goals. Additionally, they might be controlled for isolation or to meet the needs of self-sufficient monasteries. In order to strengthen the spiritual force and integrity of temples, forests have also been planted around them. These forests support the idea of the temple by utilizing certain characteristics of sacred groves and religious trees. They house specific species in predetermined orientations toward the temple they serve as well as toward one another. They tell the history of how and why people started worshiping deities, as well as the material and spiritual rewards of doing so

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(Chandrakant et al., 1990). The intimate relationships that traditional cultures have with the natural world and its resources define them (Bhagwat and Rutte, 2006). Their surroundings directly affects the preservation and sustainable conservation of biodiversity, as well as their ability to survive and thrive (Tanyanyiwa and Chikwanha, 2011). They typically possess a deep and thorough awareness of biodiversity conservation and sustainable local biodiversity utilization (Pradhan et al., 2016). Rural communities have relied on local knowledge to preserve their livelihoods and to protect the environment for ages (Zhou et al., 2021). Since the dawn of human civilization, sacred forest conservation has been an integral part of society. Therefore, an understanding of the social systems of the local population and their connections with the local ecological systems is necessary for the conservation of biodiversity and sustainable exploitation (Tura et al., 2017). Sacred woods, which are culturally protected areas, serve as excellent models for reducing the negative consequences of climate change and have proven to be effective in promoting species variety by preventing unlawful incursion through taboo restrictions (Debebe et al., 2023). Sacred woods are considered to be sanctuaries of biodiversity in the current setting of rapidly changing land use and cover (Duan et al., 2019). They stand for a significant and enduring custom of protecting particular land places that are significant to culture and frequently religion (Meena et al., 2019). Aside from their cultural value, these historically protected forests are crucial for the preservation of locally valuable species, as well as for mitigating the effects of climate change and providing habitat for vulnerable species in adjacent landscapes (Ormsby, 2013). Due to recent studies, the importance of these cultural forests for preserving biodiversity and mitigating the effects of climate change has become more apparent (Setiawan et al., 2021). If forest policy is at odds with the institutions that govern the people who require, utilize, and consequently control what happens to the land in these situations, the population, expanse, and poverty are often too high for the policy to succeed locally at any fair cost. The country's enormous financial and political commitment to social forestry is a sign of its profound respect for this reality, but the commitment's success will depend on how much more people recognize, value, and support the decisions that people are encouraged to make by their religious beliefs (Camara and Dampha, 2008). Concepts of the holy and spiritual are not new to conservation perspectives. What they referred to as "the wisdom of wilderness" and "the infinite capacity of nature to uplift the human spirit" frequently impressed and astounded early conservationists. In the early protected areas movement, these ideals were regularly mentioned and cited. As part of the "universal human heritage," early conservation efforts were made "for the benefit of all mankind," but as the sacred natural places were incorporated into formal protected areas, they were either ignored or alienated from their original owners. The resurgence of spiritual interest within conservation paradigms does not negate the application of scientific methods or knowledge. Of course, nature is "a system" that

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may be investigated, comprehended, and preserved. It is also "a set of resources" that need to be managed fairly and sustainably. However, there are alternative ways to think about it that might be more important to people. It is a mystery that defies modern science and inspires wonder; it is also a source of enjoyment to be savored and a creative force to be applauded, among other things. The various facets of nature offer chances for meaningful interactions with humans (Verschuuren, 2010). States that identify as secular have a tendency to downplay the religious significance of forest institutions, which could have an impact on how forest policy is implemented. The history, topography, and culture all have strong ties to the religious precepts surrounding trees. They have a clear structure. They are backed up by an oral history spanning several millennia that contains prescriptions, testimony, and rulings. They seem to require the same level of adherence in day-to-day local affairs as does the state's forest law. It makes sense to acknowledge their ability to influence public interests and to safeguard or create chances for them to do so. In this way, religious diversity contributes to good forest policy.

Ancient folks

People have consumed the inner bark tissues (phloem, cambium, and possibly several current years' worth of xylem cells) of many different tree species, from *Populus* to *Pinus*, either fresh or dried and processed. Edible inner bark has been used as a staple food, a famine or emergency food, a health or medicinal food, and a rare delicacy in various cultures. When the season and stage are ideal, the inner bark of many species tastes pleasant. Vitamin C and carbohydrates are present in comparatively high amounts (Niklasson et al., 1994). Before starting any extensive harvesting, harvesters typically test the trees to determine the condition of the inner bark. A sturdy, sharp instrument for cutting and pulling off the bark and a flatter, sharp-edged tool for scraping off the edible tissue from the wood or inside the bark are typically included in inner bark harvesting tools (Peattie, 2007). Neanderthals may have gathered and consumed inner bark since bone and wooden implements from Paleolithic archaeological sites in Germany and the Czech Republic are identical to those used by more modern civilizations in the area to access cambium (Shipley and Kindscher, 2016). According to Egyptian mythology, the gods perched atop a *Ficus sycomorus* sycamore fig, the fruits of which were believed to nourish the fortunate. The sun god Re rose every morning from twin sycamore figs that stood at the eastern gate of heaven, according to the Egyptian Book of the Dead. It was also believed that this tree represented the deities Nut, Isis, and most significantly, Hathor, the "Lady of the Sycamore." *Ficus sycomorus* was frequently planted next to tombs because it was thought that being buried in a coffin made of this tree's wood would transport the departed back to the mother tree goddess' womb (Metwaly et al., 2021). Records from the prehistoric Celtic society in northern Europe point to a possible relationship

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between writing and trees. Known also as ogham, the Celtic alphabet consists of 25 letters that are used for inscriptions on stone and wood. The names of these characters are derived from a group of 20 sacred trees and plants. Several of these trees were also given names to the thirteen months in the Celtic calendar. A collection of poetry connected to the mythology of the Cad Goddeu ("battle of the trees"), in which trees organized themselves and assaulted an enemy, served as one of the origins for the list of sacred trees and the Celtic "tree alphabet" (Bek-Pedersen, 2014). The enormous ash tree that connected and shielded all the worlds in Norse mythology was known as Yggdrasil, or "The Terrible One's Horse." It was also referred to as the World Tree. The three roots represented the locations of Asgard, Jotunheim, and Niflheim. It was said that three wells were at its base: the Hvergelmir (Roaring Kettle), the source of many rivers; the Well of Fate (Urdarbrunnr), guarded by the Norns; and the Well of Wisdom (Mímisbrunnr), guarded by Mimir. It was said that four deer, standing in for the four winds, would dash between the tree's branches and nibble on the buds. A renowned gossip, Ratatosk, the squirrel with "swift teeth," and Vidofnir, the golden cock perched on the highest limb, were among the other residents of the tree. Nidhogg and other serpents were rumored to have gnawed on the roots. According to tradition, the tree would catch fire on the day of Ragnarok, caused by the fire giant Surt. Yggdrasil is also known as Odin's Horse, Laerad, and Hoddmimir's Wood. According to Norse mythology, the deity Odin was killed, sacrificed, and then hung above Yggdrasil. He was given the gift of heavenly sight by the gods, even though he was regenerative and returned to life blind (Kure, 2004). The sacred groves found in the Russian North are all linked to ancient Pre-Christian customs, originating from the ethnic communities that inhabited the region prior to the arrival of the Russians. The various ethnic groups eventually became integrated into the Russian population, leading to the incorporation of Christian beliefs into the spiritual practices of the people in Northern Russia. The spiritual terrain of the Russian North has taken shape through the interaction between the Russian Orthodox (Byzantine) tradition and the ancient Finno-Ugric foundation. The Khanty and Mansy communities exhibit robust cultural practices centered around sacred forests of coniferous trees, which hold significant ties to shamanistic beliefs. (Danilina and Boreyko, 2003). The primary features of the cultural environment in the northern regions of Russia revolve around the dynamic interplay between the Forest and the Field. This relationship between the two distinct landscapes shapes the way in which communities interact with and adapt to their surroundings. The Forest represents a source of natural resources and biodiversity, while the Field symbolizes human intervention and cultivation of the land. The delicate balance between these two elements is crucial in understanding the cultural identity and practices of the Russian North (Šutova, 2012).

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Indigenous cultures

The indigenous perspective draws a clear line between medicinal plants and sacred plants. Medicinal plants are known for their healing properties, whereas sacred plants not only possess these healing properties but also have the potential to induce an altered state of consciousness in individuals who consume them. This altered state can be likened to an ecstatic seizure, which alters one's perception. Through bodily or auditory sensations, visions, or insights, it becomes possible to establish a connection with supernatural dimensions or entities. The mere experience of undergoing such transitions or alterations in one's state of mind can have a healing impact on its own, surpassing the actual actions carried out by the shaman. Within traditional indigenous settings, the notion of utilizing sacred plants for trivial reasons, such as amusement or momentary relief, is inconceivable. The wisdom associated with these plants is transmitted through a veil of secrecy, safeguarding its highly restricted knowledge. These plants are meticulously prepared and consumed in accordance with stringent guidelines, within the context of ceremonies or rituals that are typically overseen by a shaman or an individual possessing profound wisdom (Llamazares and Morales, 2004).

The Ituri forest is sacred to the Mbuti people, a hunter-gatherer community living in the northeastern Democratic Republic of the Congo. It is their sanctuary, their parent, and the source of their existence. The Mbuti are considered to be *bamiki bandura*, or "children of the forest," and they have been surrounded by a rich symbolic heritage that emphasizes the importance of *ndura*, or "forestness," since birth. Mbuti talk and sing to and about the forest in a reverent yet playful manner. They perform songs like "honey-bee" and "leaf-carrying." The most treasured songs are those without words, which are sung to awaken the forest and bring it joy just by the sound of their voices. The mimetic "elephant hunt" and "honey-bee" dances are performed for ritualistic purposes or just for fun. They are conducted to draw game and express gratitude for sustenance (Kenrick, 2004). The huge baobab tree, with its robust, wide-extending root system, is a regular gathering spot and safe haven for indigenous African communities. It also has mystical and symbolic meaning for these people. The tree's durability and health have been acknowledged with this prize (Asogwa et al., 2021).

The indigenous shamanic traditions of South America have long relied on the use of sacred plants. In our research, we have identified nine specific vegetal genera and some of their respective species that hold significant importance in these traditions. These include *Anadenanthera*, known as *cebil*, *Banisteriopsis*, commonly referred to as *ayahuasca*, *Brugmansia*, also known as *floripondio* or *angel's trumpet*, *Datura*, known as *chamico* or *Jimson weed*, *Drimys*, referred to as *canelo*, *Erythroxylum*, commonly known as *coca*, *Nicotiana*, which is *tobacco*, *Trichocereus*, encompassing

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San Pedro and Wachuma, and Virola, known as epena. These plants play a crucial role in the spiritual and healing practices of indigenous communities in South America.

The historical and contemporary connections between Indigenous communities and forests are well-established. As we look towards the future, it is evident that these associations will continue to evolve within a global landscape largely shaped by non-Indigenous frameworks. However, it is crucial for future interactions to acknowledge and respect the lasting impact of pre-European traditions on Indigenous relationships with forests. An interdisciplinary approach is necessary to analyze the various scales and intricacies of the impact of forests, forestry, and forest-based industries on the Indigenous past and future, due to the temporal scale spanning approximately 50,000 years. The Indigenous people attribute spiritual significance to forests, which were formed by the ancestral beings of the Dreamtime. These forests not only connect the past with the present but also serve as a vital part of the landscape, holding deep cultural and spiritual value for the Indigenous communities. For instance, the Nyungar community residing in the woodlands of south-west Western Australia possessed cultural narratives associated with various forest resources, including the fungus dreaming and the macrozamia (a type of cycad) dreaming. Those connected to these specific dreamings were tasked with safeguarding the respective species and refrained from consuming them. Ceremonies were conducted to ensure the prosperity of these species, thereby infusing a spiritual aspect into the sustainable utilization of natural resources. The primary trees found in the forests of the southwest region are the karri (*Eucalyptus diversicolor*) and the jarrah (*E. marginata*). These trees were associated with women's dreamings, suggesting that women had a notable influence on forest management through ceremonial practices, a phenomenon not commonly observed in other parts of Australia. The Indigenous people of southeast Queensland hold deep reverence for the forests and landforms that make up the Bunya Mountains. These natural wonders have been and continue to be sacred to them. The bunya pine, known as *Araucaria bidwillii*, played a crucial role in the lives of these Indigenous communities. Its abundant harvest of highly nutritious nuts served as the foundation for large inter-tribal gatherings that took place from late January to March, when the nuts were ripe. These gatherings were not only a means of sustenance but also served as a vital component of their traditional systems of trade, exchange of goods, marriage, and ceremonial activities (Dargavel, 2005).

Forests and trees hold significant importance within the cultures of the Oceanic region. The belief systems and worldviews of Oceanic communities are intricately intertwined with the symbolism of trees, representing a sense of connection to their homeland as well as the ability to traverse the vast expanses of the ocean. The immense trees of the forest, like the renowned New Zealand kauri, hold a profound significance as they serve as a symbolic link to the land they inhabit. Furthermore, these colossal trees have played a vital role in the construction of canoes, which were essential for

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the daring expeditions across the vast Pacific Ocean. Across the historical timeline of the Pacific region, the indigenous communities have deeply relied on the native forests and trees for both economic sustenance and spiritual fulfillment. Similar to indigenous societies globally, the traditional practices of Oceanic cultures were rooted in the ideology that humans are interconnected with nature, rather than having dominion over it. The Maori mythology encompasses a captivating narrative about the kauri tree, scientifically known as *Agathis australis*, which holds significant importance as a powerful creation story. Within this mythological framework, the kauri tree not only assumes the role of the forest deity but also emerges as the progenitor of the very first human being. The majestic trees belonging to Tāne, the deity of the forest, were known as Ngā Tokotoko-o-te-rangi, which translates to "the posts that hold the heavens aloft," as they supported Ranginui, the sky father, above Papatūānuku, the Earth mother (Feary, 2012).

The Dong, a Chinese ethnic group comprising around 3,495,993 individuals, reside in the neighboring areas of Guizhou, Hunan, and Guangxi in the southwestern region of China. Being polytheistic, the Dong people incorporate their traditional medicine into the broader Chinese medical system, utilizing numerous indigenous plants for medicinal purposes. The Dong villages are home to a system of sacred landscapes that encompasses space, rituals, and spiritual beliefs. This system harmoniously incorporates local fengshui patterns, contributing to the well-being of the local biodiversity and the physical and mental health of its residents. Notably, this integration plays a crucial role in fostering the healthy development of children within the community. The fengshui woodland is situated at the outskirts of the village's residential area, with the village itself being encircled by dense forests and terraced fields. Therapeutic environments encompass various dimensions, including material, social, spiritual, and symbolic aspects. Additionally, it has been highlighted that a therapeutic landscape emerges from the convergence of physical and built surroundings, social factors, and human interpretations, creating a healing-friendly atmosphere. The cultural landscape resource, which has undergone changes over thousands of years, plays a crucial role in influencing the overall well-being and growth of individuals, particularly young children (Yang et al., 2023).

History

Pomegranate, a fruit of great significance in ancient times, was considered a divine gift. Its various captivating attributes included its beautiful blossom and flower, as well as its unique shape - a squat, fat sphere with a pointed or crowned tip, symbolizing power. The pomegranate's vibrant red color, reminiscent of gold, added to its allure, and even the slightest touch would leave a stain. The fruit itself consisted of a remarkable number of ruby-red seeds, precisely 613, which served as a subtle indication of its fertility. Additionally, the pomegranate possessed healing properties

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through its curative blood-red juice and its soothing yellow inner rind. Originating from the East, this fruit held a special place in ancient art, often depicted and replicated as a prominent symbol of abundance, perfection, and sanctity. The shrub's green splendor, the vibrant pink and red hues of its flowers, the deep purples, crimson, and shining reds of its fruits, and the perfectly arranged geometry of its seeds all contributed to its allure. As the summer drew to a close, the pomegranate would ripen, offering a refreshing juice to quench the thirst of the sweltering final days. The vibrant red hue and golden yellow tones of the pomegranate's skin, coupled with its crimson juice and plentiful seeds, render it a fitting symbol for human fertility, as well as the concepts of life and death. Due to these characteristics, ancient Mesopotamian art frequently depicted the pomegranate alongside deities associated with fertility, abundance, and fecundity. In Assyrian imagery, the pomegranate is commonly portrayed as the Tree of Life. The pomegranate fruit was historically considered a symbol of fertility due to its abundance of arils in Hittite rituals. The symbolism of the pomegranate was associated with concepts of birth, growth, fertility, and reproduction. This symbolic representation was commonly depicted in various establishments, particularly in cereal and oil stores, signifying expectations of prosperity and abundance (Spagnoli and Nigro, 2018; Turgut, 2019). This cosmic tree also was the residence of the Babylonian's primal mother goddess. For the earlier Sumerians, the cosmic tree, known as the huluppu (according to some sources this was a weeping willow – perhaps *Salix babylonica*), connected the underworld (Ereshkigal), the mortal realm (Enlil), and the heavenly realm (An), and was subsequently a symbol of life and renewal amongst the priest class (Hageneder, 2020). The tree, which was discovered along the shores of the Euphrates River, was later transported by Inanna to the city of Erech where she planted it in her garden. Inanna had envisioned the tree growing tall so that she could fashion a throne out of it. However, despite her hopes, the tree did not produce any new growth and remained lifeless until it met its end at the hands of Gilgamesh and the other residents of the city. Once the tree was cut down, its wood was utilized to craft a variety of useful items (Freeman, 2016). The date palm (*Phoenix dactylifera* L.) stands as one of the earliest fruit crops cultivated in the arid landscapes of the Arabian Peninsula, North Africa, and the Middle East. It is believed that the date palm originated in or around present-day Iraq, with the practice of date cultivation spreading to numerous regions during ancient times. Dates hold a crucial position as a primary food and income source for the local communities in the Middle East and North Africa, contributing significantly to the economy, society, and environment of these regions. Apart from being consumed directly as a food item, dates undergo various processing methods and are utilized in different forms, while other parts of the date palm tree serve multiple purposes. In the ancient times, the cultivation of dates held a special symbolic importance representing abundance and fertility. Dates were highly revered for their spiritual and cultural significance among

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the inhabitants of the Middle East. The significance of date palms and their cultivation is evident in the depictions found on ancient Assyrian and Babylonian tablets, such as the renowned Code of Hammurabi, which included regulations related to the cultivation and trade of dates (Chao and Krueger, 2007).

The development of ancient Greece unfolded in various settings, including mountains, shores, and plains, all of which played crucial roles in shaping ancient Greek civilization. Among these settings, the *ἱερός*, known as the 'sacred grove' in contemporary English, held particular importance for the ancient Greeks. These sacred groves were designated areas filled with trees that were dedicated to divine beings (Carroll, 2017). They could be found across the ancient Greek landscape, spanning from rural areas to the growing cities. Sacred groves, being one of the most ancient places of worship in the Greek civilization, offered the Greek people a serene environment where they could establish a profound connection with their deities, enveloped by the majestic trees of the grove (Barnett, 2007). In ancient Greece, sacred groves held a significant place as they were dedicated and safeguarded in the name of a divine being. The term "sacred groves" itself implies their sanctity and the belief that they belonged exclusively to a higher power (Bowe, 2010). Sacred groves frequently served as the location for religious rituals and ceremonies, as well as the practice of cults, with particular religious guidelines governing their utilization (Käppel and Pothou, 2015). In the confines of many revered forests, it was mandated by local regulations that no harm could come to any human, animal, or plant residing within the precincts of the forest (Ogden, 2010). The sacred areas were delineated from the natural environment through either tangible or mental barriers, which were overseen by the community's leaders or the religious figures associated with the specific deity of the sacred grove (Eidinow and Kindt, 2015). Sacred groves frequently encompassed more than just trees; in certain instances, these groves served as productive areas, hosting gardens, flowers, and fruit-bearing trees (Pedley, 2005). Temples, figurines, or altars could be found within specific groves, while the number of trees and the size of the grove's boundaries differed from one grove to another (Dillion, 1997). Sacred groves did not exclusively consist of a single species of tree, as some groves were composed of a variety of tree species while others were dominated by a single type. However, there were certain tree species that were more frequently found in sacred groves, such as oak, poplar, olive, and cypress trees (Miles, 2016).

The ancient Romans held the belief that each parcel of land and every tree possessed its own protective spirit or genius, which needed to be satisfied before any activities could commence in that particular location. It was deemed inappropriate to remove trees (*lucum conlocare*) without first presenting an offering to the deities believed to inhabit those sacred spaces (King, 2003). Originally, the term *lucus* referred to trees or a small area of woodland, but its meaning quickly transformed to describe an open space encircled by woodland, resembling a landscaped park. These spaces were often

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utilized for rituals, featuring wells, springs, and shrines with images of deities. In some cases, the larger luci could include a temple or structures for markets. Roman sacred groves were commonly situated on the outskirts of cities, surrounded by cultivated land, and served various purposes such as hosting meetings and assemblies (Rüpke, 2007). The association between specific tree species found in sacred areas and the gods worshipped there was established. Pliny the Elder observed the long-standing tradition of honoring trees within temple grounds in Italy, noting that various trees were consistently linked to particular deities, such as the oak tree to Jupiter, the bay tree to Apollo, the olive tree to Minerva, the myrtle tree to Venus, and the poplar tree to Hercules (Brundrett, 2011). Trees located within sacred groves were commonly thought to possess mystical or prophetic qualities, with some of these attributes being associated with the fluctuating political destiny of the empire. For instance, a fig tree that thrived in the forum of Rome served as a revered symbol of the tree where the she-wolf nurtured the forsaken infants Romulus and Remus, who were legendary figures credited with establishing the city (Evans, 1991).

The advent of Christianity witnessed a struggle against established traditions, as it is believed that sacred groves were intentionally demolished or defiled, and individual trees were felled by missionaries who sought to convert the pagans. However, upon closer examination, it can be argued that Christianity assimilated and incorporated the sacred symbolism associated with trees to serve its own objectives. Saint Boniface, an Anglo-Saxon missionary from the eighth century who worked in what is now Germany, is said to have supervised the cutting down of Donar's Oak, a tree revered by Germanic pagans, and used its wood to construct a Christian church. Similarly, Chartres Cathedral was constructed on the grounds of a sacred grove, leading to speculation that the decorations on the southern facade may have been inspired by the trees that once stood there. The influence of trees in sacred spaces extended beyond overt references, as seen in Gothic cathedrals where the design of pillars and vaults mimicked the stylized forms of tree trunks and branches found in a forest.

Following the decline of the Roman Empire in the 5th Century, the Church assumed a prominent role in the development of Garden Design. Monastery Cloister Gardens emerged across Europe, drawing inspiration from the design elements of Roman and Greek Peristyle Gardens. Rather than a direct tribute to the Romans, the prevalence of these gardens can be attributed to the fact that early monasteries were often established within repurposed Roman Villas that already featured such garden layouts. The Romans' innovations in planting design were eventually abandoned and not further developed (Maffei et al., 2019). Gradually, the basic cloister gardens transformed into the Hortus conclusus, which means "enclosed garden" in Latin. This term became closely associated with the Virgin Mary, as she was frequently portrayed in enclosed gardens in artwork, symbolizing her unassailable purity. This religious symbolism extended to the actual gardens, where plants were carefully chosen for

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their profound symbolism. For instance, the red rose represented the blood of Christ and the martyrs, while the white rose symbolized the Virgin Mary (Husti and Cantor, 2015).

Religions

Hinduism

Hinduism, with its ancient origins, retains many of its traditional elements to this day. The religion is rich in totemic symbols that play a significant role in Hindu beliefs and rituals. Numerous rivers and mountains are revered as sacred in Hindu scriptures, such as Kailas in the Himalayas, which is worshipped as the seat of Lord Shiva. In South India, Agastyarkoodam in the Western Ghats is regarded as the focal point of Saint Agastya, while Sabarimala attracts millions of pilgrims as the abode of Lord Ayyappa. In India, there are several rivers that hold great significance and are considered sacred, making them eligible for worship. Some of these revered rivers include the Ganga, Brahmaputra, Saraswati, and Pampa, among others. Similarly, various animals are worshipped throughout the country, with the Cow, Rat, Elephant, and Snake being among the revered creatures. Indian mythology categorizes forests into three types: Tapovan, which are utilized by saints for meditation purposes, Mahavan, which are dense and untamed natural forests, and Sreevan, which are forests associated with prosperity. Sreevan specifically consists of dense forests and groves, contributing to its lush and abundant nature. In India, there are several plants that hold significant religious and cultural importance and are worshipped by the people. These include the Banyan tree (*Ficus benghalensis*), Champaka (*Michelia champaca* Linn.), Downy Jasmine (*Jasminum multiflorum*), Kadam (*Anthocephalus cadamba* (Roxb)), Neem (*Azadirachta indica*), Asoka (*Saraca indica*), Lotus (*Nelumbo nucifera*), and Rudraksha (*Elaeocarpus ganitrus* (Roxb.)). These plants are revered and worshipped throughout the country. Additionally, the Bodhi tree (*Ficus religiosa*) holds great significance in the evolution of Buddhism, as it was under this tree that Gautam Buddha attained enlightenment (Pandey and Pandey, 2016). According to Hinduism, there exists a long-standing belief that the natural world holds great respect for five fundamental elements: Earth (Prithvi), Fire (Agni), Water (Jal), Air (Wayo), and Space (Akash). These elements are regarded as sacred and are worshipped as manifestations of the divine. The preservation of these five elements is of utmost importance for religious, cultural, and spiritual purposes. Numerous studies have been conducted to delve deeper into this ethical perspective, aiming to establish a quantifiable link between such beliefs and the conservation of biodiversity, as well as the promotion of sustainable ecosystems (Chaudhry and Murtem, 2015).

Buddhism

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Sacred sites play a significant role in Tibetan culture due to the influence of Tibetan Buddhist, Bön, and local religious beliefs and customs. Within Tibetan culture, the interconnectedness of all living and non-living entities through karmic connections is perceived to extend throughout the entire country and environment (Swearer, 1998). In their study, Sponsel and Natadecha-Sponsel (1993) highlighted the common practice of constructing Buddhist temples in Thailand within forested areas, known as "wat pa." As a result, the encompassing forested regions were imbued with a sense of sanctity and became sacred spaces. The size of these forest temples varied, ranging from 0.5 hectares to 8 hectares or even larger. According to Omura (2004), Japan is home to a staggering number of 34,000 sacred forests, which hold significant importance for both Shinto shrines and Buddhist temples. Several of these forests can be found in urban regions, with an average size of 6.1 hectares for both rural and urban Shinto shrine and Buddhist temple forests as reported by Omura (2004). The torii gate, found in Shinto forests in Japan, serves as a significant element that separates the sacred area of the forest from the secular space beyond its boundaries (Nadeau, 1996). Nature spirits known as Kami inhabit the Shinto forests. The Meiji Jingu Shinto shrine and surrounding forest cover an area of 72 hectares in Tokyo, with the shrine being built in the year 1920 (Omura 2004; Ishii et al. 2010). *Illicium religiosum* and *Cleyra japonica* are considered sacred tree species that serve the purpose of demarcating and purifying holy places. Additionally, *Michelia compressa* is commonly planted at the entrance of shrines. It is important to note that most shrine forests are privately owned and not accessible to the general public. These areas are typically maintained by monks or local residents who primarily utilize this urban sacred natural space. Consequently, these sites experience minimal disturbance to their vegetation. However, certain shrine or temple forests may contain managed areas where intentional tree plantings are carried out (Ishii et al., 2010; Omura, 2004).

Elaeocarpus ganitrus Roxb., a member of the *Elaeocarpaceae* family, is known for its seeds which are traditionally used to create rudraksha beads, commonly used in Hinduism and Buddhism (Stutley, 1985). The term "rudraksha" is a Sanskrit word that combines "Rudra" (referring to Shiva) and "aksha" (meaning "Tear Drops"), symbolizing Lord Shiva in Hindu mythology. *Erythrina subumbrans* Merr., a member of the *Fabaceae* family, is known by the common name coral bean. In the Hindu religion, the flowers of *E. subumbrans* are utilized in religious ceremonies and for adorning hair. Within Hinduism, the Mandara tree located in Lord Indra's heavenly garden in Svarga is identified as *E. stricta* Roxb. This same symbolism is also present in Tibetan Buddhism. The seeds of another species of coral bean, *E. latissima* E. Mey., are employed for medicinal applications (Dharmadasa et al., 2016). *Ficus racemosa* L., also referred to as *F. glomerata* Roxb, is commonly known as the cluster fig tree, Indian fig tree, goolar, or udumbara in Sanskrit. This tree holds significance in the mythological text "Atharva Veda" due to its association with prosperity and triumph

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over adversaries. Additionally, in Theravada Buddhism, this plant was utilized in the pursuit of enlightenment (bodhi) by the 26th Lord Buddha of Konaagama (Selin, 2003). *Magnolia champaca*, a member of the Magnoliaceae family, is commonly referred to as champak. The scent of *M. champaca* holds great significance among the followers of Hinduism and Buddhism. In Theravada Buddhism, champak was utilized to attain Bodhi by Lord Buddha, also known as Atthadassi. Tibetan beliefs suggest that the future Buddha will attain enlightenment beneath the white blossoms of the champak tree (Chai and Rho, 2020).

Confucianism

Confucius, who lived between 551 and 479 BC, was the founder of the philosophical school or comprehensive system of ideas that bears his name, and lived in the state of Lu, now known as Shandong or Shantung. The concept of "ecological cognition" is based on the teachings of his master, also known as Kong or Kongzi. Confucian philosophy emphasises the interconnectedness between Heaven, humanity and morality. Confucius recognised the importance of charity as a noble aspiration and an eternal virtue. He believed that human beings should behave in an environmentally friendly way towards nature, as it is the source of the natural resources that sustain human life. Confucius argued for a loving relationship with nature and discouraged actions such as cutting down trees or killing animals at inappropriate times. He also stressed the importance of love for fellow human beings and filial piety as a means of respecting and protecting the natural environment. This underlines the Confucian belief in the duty of filial piety, which extends not only to human relationships but also to respect and care for Mother Nature, as humans are intimately connected to the Sky and the Earth (Tucker, 2020). The basic principles of Confucianism, including the concept of benevolence, the practice of empathy, and the Confucian approach to the expression of love and kindness, play a vital role in building strong relationships between man and nature, the individual and society, the self and others, and the individual's own identity. These values serve as an essential tool for cultivating harmonious relationships and fostering a sense of interconnectedness between different aspects of life (Yum, 1988). The essence of the worldview, which emphasises charity as a fundamental principle, plays a crucial role in promoting intercultural dialogue and the development of universal ethical standards. In Confucian teachings, the principles of charity share similarities with the values of Christian charity (Dias and Onishi, 2023). The Confucian idea of transcendence is linked to the concept of heaven (tian), which differs from the Abrahamic conception. Confucianism believes in heaven and the mandate of heaven (tian ming), emphasizing that humans can achieve perfection and align with heavenly principles. This philosophy asserts that humans have a mission on earth, which requires fulfilling their ethical and moral duties. Consequently, Confucianism uniquely views moral action as transcendent and the

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secular world as sacred. In this way, Confucianism presents an entirely unique religious perspective, suggesting that the sacred must, or at least can, be understood in its secular context (Weixiang, 2009). Confucianism argues that the essence of human freedom can only be fully manifested when individuals have a deep awareness and understanding of the right path to follow in life, and when they voluntarily and autonomously choose to adhere to that path (Li, 2014). The discovery of ethics within the Confucian ideological ecology was a significant discovery that encompassed both family and social ethical characteristics. As society moved from a focus on the family unit to a broader understanding of ecological balance, this ethical framework became increasingly important and influential (Weiming, 2017).

The various environmental ethics embraced by Confucianism, such as respect for the Sky, the Earth, and the human order, which together form the traditional Chinese trio that promotes a harmonious relationship between humans and nature. The ecological principles of Confucianism are integral to their atomistic cosmology, as they acknowledge the interconnectedness of all elements of the universe, emphasizing the triad of Heaven, Earth and Mankind (Yu, 2011). Confucius emphasizes the mutual relationship between man and nature and rejects the idea of human dominance over nature. This holistic approach is widely recognised as a fundamental ethical principle in dealing with environmental degradation. It also emphasises the inseparability of the 'natural' and 'social' realms, recognising humanity's role as the agent responsible for transforming the universe from within. The ongoing process of capitalist globalisation exemplifies the extensive and pervasive human transformation of the 'natural' world. Consequently, the term 'Anthropocene', which denotes a geological epoch characterised by significant human-induced changes to the planet's ecosystem, has gained considerable recognition among scientists and the general public. It is important to note, however, that an organic worldview alone cannot provide a cure for the ecological decline we are experiencing today (Garrison et al., 2024). In the organic worldview, ancient groves play a crucial role in preserving the unique environmental characteristics of a region and are of great value from both a conservation biological and cultural heritage perspective. As such, these relic forests serve to promote the harmonious coexistence of urban populations and nature, provided efforts are made to protect and revitalize them through ecological conservation and restoration initiatives (Jongwon et al., 2011). Given the complexity of contemporary ecological challenges, it is imperative not only to implement economic, legal and moral strategies, but also to reassess the cultural implications of Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism. Drawing inspiration from these philosophies can provide valuable insights into ecological and environmental conservation, enabling a more effective contribution to the development of a social ecological civilization (Dellios, 2001). The tradition of Confucianism confronts the current

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ecological crisis, emphasizing the need for ethical principles and socio-political efforts to address this pressing problem.

New Confucianism emerged in the last century as a successor to Neo-Confucianism in mainland China, Hong Kong and Taiwan, primarily influenced by Western culture. Scholars of New Confucianism, known as modern Confucianists, reexamined Confucian principles by incorporating Western philosophies into traditional Chinese beliefs to emphasize the beneficial aspects of Chinese cultural heritage (Makeham, 2003). Science education in China has been adapted to local conditions and, with the industrialisation of the country in recent decades, has been influenced by both the advantages and disadvantages of Confucianism. In parallel with the awareness of the negative effects, the traditional Confucian view of harmony between man and nature (tian ren he yi) is increasingly fading. However, the concept of tian ren he yi, with its Confucian values, can be a valuable complement to global education efforts to promote sustainability (Deng, 2011). Sustainable development plays a significant role in addressing environmental issues in China. With its rich history and great culture, China seeks to embrace and build on the remarkable achievements of global environmental culture. In doing so, China is seeking to present a distinctive approach that meets the needs of the modern age and promotes a shared vision for achieving common goals among nations worldwide (Pan, 2003).

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Taoism

Lao Tzu is credited with the creation of Taoism, the ancient Chinese philosophy and religion, documented in the book "Tao Te Ching". Taoism became popular in the eighth century during the Tang Dynasty. In the centuries that followed, Taoism coexisted peacefully with Confucianism and Buddhism, creating a unique cultural and religious environment in China. The early Warring States period, specifically the 4th and 5th centuries BC, saw the emergence of the essence of Taoist philosophy. Two major texts, namely the concise Tao Te Ching and the anecdotal Zhuangzi, were written during this period and are widely regarded as the foundational works of Taoist thought. These texts served as the cornerstone of the collection of Taoist writings that gradually accumulated over the following centuries. Finally, in the 5th century AD, the monks compiled these writings into the Daozang Canon, creating a comprehensive collection of Taoist literature. Originally rooted in meditation and detachment from worldly things, Taoism evolved to focus on longevity and transcending physical limitations through mystical rituals and practices. In China, followers of Taoism delved into alchemy in search of the elixir of life and founded cults to worship deities associated with longevity. Taoism attaches great importance to the symbiosis between man and nature, which aims to achieve balance with the universe, known as the Tao. According to Taoist beliefs, spiritual immortality is achieved when the spirit of the body merges with the universe at death. Texts such as the "Tao Te Ching" serve as a guide for their followers, instructing them on how to behave and how to achieve this state of harmony. Unlike Taoists who perceive this energy as a deity, Taoists see it as an integral part of their belief system, which includes various deities. At the core of Taoism are the principles of yin and yang, which symbolise balance between opposing forces, interconnectedness and unity within the vast expanse of the universe (Houston, 1991). In addition, Taoism in China has developed elaborate systems of divination and fortune-telling, which has contributed to its popularity beyond the country's borders. The spread of Taoist concepts was intertwined with the spread of other Chinese cultural elements such as Confucianism, Buddhism and the Chinese writing system in the region (Alam, 2023). In Japan, Taoist influences were absorbed into the wider continental cultural milieu and did not emerge as a separate religious tradition. Nevertheless, the influence of Taoism was significant, particularly in the areas of divination and magical practices. The early Japanese imperial court even established an Office of Divination, which used Taoist methods to manage state affairs, while divination practices of Taoist origin continued to be widespread in Japanese society (Kohn, 1995). In the 19th and 20th centuries, Taoism suffered considerable devastation due to religious persecution and the multitude of wars and conflicts that plagued China during the period known as the Century of Humiliation. This period of persecution was caused by a number of factors, including prejudices stemming from

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Confucianism, traditional Chinese modernist ideologies, European and Japanese colonialism, and Christian missionary work. By the 20th century, only one complete copy of the Taoist canon, the Tao Tsang, had survived intact, preserved in the White Cloud Monastery in Beijing. Chen Yingning (1880-1969) became a prominent figure in Taoism during this period. He played a leading role as a member of the early Chinese Taoist Association and wrote many books advocating the practice of Taoism (Yijie, 1991). However, with the rise of communism in the late 1940s, these religions were banned, resulting in a decline in the number of believers. The majority of today's Taoists live in Taiwan, with a smaller number in China, and there Taoism follows the Chinese lunar calendar in its religious rituals (Waldron, 1998).

The origin of the typical Chinese garden, characterised by yin-yang symbolism, can be traced back to Taoism. While the Han emperors had previously built large artificial landscapes or parks that included mountains, ravines, forests, rivers, lakes and open areas to serve as hunting grounds, the spread of Taoism came during the Six Dynasties and the T'ang Dynasty, when Taoism was prevalent. The purpose of these gardens was to create a tranquil and intimate atmosphere, reflecting the harmony of heaven on earth. They symbolised a utopian paradise where all forms of life were protected and cared for. In contrast to the grandiose and extravagant nature of parks that catered to hunting and aggression, Taoist gardens were a symbol of simplicity and naturalness, providing a haven for sages, scholars and nature lovers. The garden within the city was surrounded by walls, which served not only as a boundary but also as a backdrop for the various plants. These walls often had openings that offered unique views, especially in areas where space was limited. In urban settings, the walls themselves became gardens, sometimes designed as roof gardens, with trees and shrubs on top and flowers and ferns in the gaps below. The surrounding walls played a crucial role in creating tranquillity amidst the hustle and bustle of city life. They symbolised the concept of the enclosed garden, while also introducing a yin-yang balance of light and shade. The walls not only defined the garden space, but also added depth and meaning to the whole design, making the urban garden a haven where peace could be found amidst chaos (Chen et al., 2021). Fengshui forests are usually designated areas of protected forests or plantations that are believed to bring prosperity, health and positive fortune to the societies that guard them. The term fengshui is a combination of two Chinese words, feng (wind) and shui (water). Fengshui refers to a set of beliefs and customs in which the circulation of life energy, qi, closely linked to the movement of wind and water, is regulated at various scales, from large areas to individual homes and spaces, with the aim of enhancing the well-being of communities and individuals (Chen, 2008). Chen et al. (2018) classifies fengshui forests into three different types based on their location in the landscape in relation to individual man-made structures: village fengshui forests, cemetery fengshui forests and temple fengshui forests. Village fengshui forests can then be divided into four sub-categories: water gate fengshui

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forests (shuikoulin), back mountain fengshui forests (longzuolin), foothill fengshui forests (dianjiaolin) and house fengshui forests. In terms of their role in the construction of residential buildings, fengshui forests can be divided into three main groups: windbreak forests (dangfenglin), which help reduce wind speed; back-mountain fengshui forests (longzuolin), which provide protection against upland erosion and flooding; and footing fengshui forests (dianjiaolin), which are used to prevent erosion that threatens the stability of house foundations. Within the historic China, the practice of Feng Shui holds a significant role in the lives of its inhabitants. This belief system and its practical application are deeply ingrained in the cultural fabric of the community, serving as an unifying force that fosters familial and societal harmony. As such, it plays a crucial role in shaping the cultural values and individual identities of the people. Various stakeholders within the community have differing perspectives and interests when it comes to Feng Shui. While the local government views it as a valuable asset for bolstering tourism and the economy, the residents themselves perceive Feng Shui as intricately linked to their sense of place and personal identity. This dynamic interplay between different stakeholders underscores the multifaceted nature of Feng Shui within the taoist communities. The transformation of traditional spaces and buildings in modern China due to political upheaval and urbanization has led to the loss of their original identity, meaning, and significance, as highlighted by Chen and Romice (2009). In China, Feng Shui serves as a vernacular discourse that imparts significance to the historical urban structure, reflecting the heritage of indigenous communities with a focus on localities and indigeneity, albeit amidst ongoing changes. The act of practicing heritage involves bringing the interpretations of the past into our present understanding, as emphasized by Zhang and Wu (2015). In a rapidly changing society, maintaining a connection with the memories and values of the past becomes essential. Recognizing Feng Shui and environments designed according to Feng Shui as a living heritage can play a role in preserving cultural diversity and identity in the midst of increasing globalization.

Judaism

The Christ's Thorn Jujube, scientifically known as *Ziziphus spina-christi* (L.) Desf. and belonging to the Rhamnaceae family, is an evergreen tree native to Sudan. It can be found growing in Israel within valleys and lowlands, typically thriving at elevations below 500 meters above sea level. Within rabbinical texts, the plant is referred to as "rimin" in Mishna (Demai, 1:1; Kilayim, 1:4), while in the Talmud it is identified as "kanari" (Bab. Talmud, Baba Bathra, 48b). This nomenclature could potentially stem from its prevalence in the vicinity of Lake Kinneret, also known as the Sea of Galilee (Bab. Talmud, Mgillah, 6a). Within Christian tradition, the tree has been associated with the thorn bush that was used to crown Jesus prior to his crucifixion, as mentioned in Matthew 27:28–29, John 19:5, and Mark 15:17. It is from this symbolic

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connection that the scientific name "spina-christi" originates. The Christ's Thorn Jujube holds a significant religious significance in Israel, being revered as a sacred tree. It is believed that when this tree reaches the age of 40, it becomes a gathering place for saints who seek solace under its branches. Consequently, a stern warning is issued to deter anyone from daring to harm the tree or its branches, as the saints are said to possess the power to retaliate against such actions. An intriguing tale recounts the enchanting melodies that emanate from the Christ's Thorn Jujube trees every Thursday evening. Additionally, a recorded account from the Holy Land narrates the sighting of ethereal lights amidst the branches of select trees near "N'an'a" (Na'an) and 'Aqir" ('Aqron) on Thursday nights (Hanauer, 2002). Since ancient times, the tree and its diverse components have played a significant role as a valuable source of pharmaceuticals. Throughout history, the various parts of trees have been utilized for their medicinal properties, providing essential ingredients for the development of pharmaceutical products. This longstanding tradition highlights the enduring importance of trees in the field of medicine, as they continue to contribute to the advancement of pharmaceutical research and innovation (Lev, 2006).

The Cabbalistic Tree of Life, a fundamental concept in Jewish mysticism, consisted of ten branches known as the Sephiroth. These branches symbolized the ten attributes or emanations through which the infinite and divine would establish a connection with the finite realm. The menorah, a candlestick with multiple branches, holds great significance as one of the oldest symbols in Judaism. It is believed to be connected to the tree of life, representing a profound connection between the two. According to Exodus 25:31-37, it is believed that the design of the menorah was directly bestowed upon Moses by God. The menorah was intended to consist of six branches, each adorned with cups resembling almond flowers along with buds and blossoms. In the book of Proverbs, specifically in Proverbs 3:18, wisdom is described as a "tree of life" for those who embrace it. This metaphorical representation emphasizes the significance and value of wisdom in one's life. By comparing wisdom to a tree of life, the passage suggests that wisdom brings nourishment, growth, and vitality to those who actively seek and embrace it. Just as a tree provides shade, shelter, and sustenance, wisdom offers guidance, understanding, and fulfillment. This imagery highlights the transformative power of wisdom and encourages individuals to pursue it as a source of abundant life and well-being (Crews and Sène, 2003).

Christianity in general

The cross, frequently portrayed as a tree, plays a pivotal role in Christianity. Similar to how a tree offers protection and nourishment, the cross signifies the selfless act of Jesus Christ, providing salvation, forgiveness, and the opportunity for believers to reconcile with God. It serves as a significant symbol that embodies the convergence of divine grace and human redemption, serving as a poignant testament to God's love

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and the promise of everlasting life for those who have faith. Trees have held a prominent place in Christianity, starting from the creation narrative to the life and teachings of Jesus Christ. They are emblematic of various themes such as divine sustenance, the dichotomy between following God's will and straying from it, and the redemptive sacrifice of Jesus on the cross (Wallace, 2005). The religion of Christianity, which originated from Judaism and is characterized by belief in one God, expanded across the Greco-Roman territories. The relinquishment of sacred trees posed a challenge for Medieval Christian Celtic and Germanic converts, as they were hesitant to abandon these significant symbols. Extensive evidence suggests that pagan customs and rituals persisted unabated in the realm of popular devotion and folklore. Among these, the Glastonbury Thorn stands out as the most renowned. According to ancient tales, this particular tree is believed to have originated from the staff of Joseph of Arimathaea, miraculously taking root and blossoming (Cusack, 2018). Christian practices may have originated from the veneration of sacred trees, as they were often utilized as gathering spots. According to McClure and Collins (1999), Augustine of Canterbury convened with the British Church leaders at a location referred to as Augustine's Oak, highlighting the significance of trees in religious gatherings and assemblies. Various celestial trees are associated with different concepts, such as knowledge or wisdom. Among these, a particularly renowned example is the cosmic tree that once flourished in the Garden of Eden within the Christian tradition. This extraordinary tree bore the forbidden fruit, which granted individuals the profound understanding of good and evil. The fruit in question has traditionally been symbolized by apricots, pomegranates, or figs, despite the common portrayal by northern artists and writers as an apple. This topic is extensive, but the aforementioned examples will have to serve as sufficient illustrations. The three primary monotheistic religions that emerged from the Middle East and exerted significant cultural influence over the Western hemisphere, namely Christianity, Judaism, and Islam, share a common stance against idol worship and do not adhere to the belief in sacred species or sacred locations. Christian missionaries, as documented by Adler (2006), occasionally engaged in the destruction of sacred groves due to their association with idolatry. This act was carried out with the intention of eliminating rival sacred sites or as a form of punishment. However, the sacred tree also appears as a symbol in the Christian religion. Jesus frequently utilized trees and the natural world as a means to communicate profound spiritual concepts during His time on Earth. One notable example is when Jesus referenced the mustard seed, highlighting the immense strength of faith and its capacity for remarkable expansion. Additionally, Jesus employed the fig tree as a metaphor to teach lessons on loyalty and the importance of producing good works. This tree became a potent symbol of spiritual productivity and authentic discipleship. Furthermore, Jesus' crucifixion on a wooden cross, often referred to as the "tree," served as the ultimate demonstration of God's boundless love

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and salvation for all of humanity. esus utilized various parables to impart important lessons, often using trees as symbolic imagery. For instance, the parable of the sower and the seeds illustrates how a receptive heart is akin to fertile soil, where the seed (symbolizing God's word) can grow and yield a plentiful harvest. Similarly, the parable of the vine and branches underscores the necessity of staying connected to Jesus, described as the true vine, in order to bear spiritual fruit. These parables function as prompts for Christians to remember the significance of spiritual sustenance, perseverance, and reliance on Christ (Crossan, 1973).

Mormonism

On April 6, 1830, in Fayette, New York, Joseph Smith Jr. officially founded the religious organization that would later become known as the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. At its inception, this newly established church had a modest membership of six. It professed to be a restored version of the original Church of Jesus Christ that existed in the New Testament era. He taught that this ancient church, led by the twelve apostles, had fallen into apostasy, a state of decay and rebellion, about a century after the time of Christ. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints has established itself as the authentic and vibrant religious institution on the planet. Mormonism refers to the set of religious beliefs and rituals followed by individuals belonging to the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, commonly referred to as Mormons. It encompasses the teachings and principles that were re-proclaimed to mankind by the Prophet Joseph Smith. When asked about the essence of Mormonism, adherents of the church often express their deep devotion and admiration for Jesus Christ and see him as the centre of their faith. People belonging to The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints are present in various sectors of society, in areas such as business and philanthropy, academia and scientific research, political relations and government, and entertainment and journalism. In America, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is the fourth largest Christian church. It is worth noting that a significant proportion of its members live outside the United States. However, despite the prevalence and widespread presence of this religious faith, surveys consistently show that relatively few people have a comprehensive knowledge of the Mormon faith (Infoplease, 2005). The Mormon community is a religious group that embraces Christian beliefs and teachings derived from the revelations of their founder, Joseph Smith. The majority of Mormons belong to the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS), based in Salt Lake City, Utah, which boasts more than 17 million members worldwide. An alternative Mormon denomination, the Community of Christ, is based in Independence, Missouri, and has approximately 250,000 followers (Givens and Barlow, 2015). Today, the LDS Church is present in various regions of the world, including the United States, Latin America, Canada, Europe, the Philippines, Africa and parts of Oceania. Although Mormons share many Christian beliefs, they

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also have a unique set of philosophies, values, and practices that distinguish them from other Christian denominations (Goman, 2006). The Mormon Cultural Region (MCR) is primarily focused on the state of Utah, but also extends to parts of Idaho and the neighboring regions of Nevada, Arizona, and Wyoming. Despite the fact that Mormons make up only 1% of the national population, within this region, approximately 70% of Utah residents and 25% of Idaho residents profess the Mormon faith. In this region, the Mormon Church has a significant influence on policy decisions, particularly on environmental and energy policy. The influence of the Mormon Church clearly influences the outcome of debates and discussions in these key policy areas (Upton, 2005). There is a growing recognition that religious faith can play a significant role in bridging political boundaries when it comes to supporting environmental measures. This is particularly evident in regions where religious culture plays a dominant role, such as the Mormon cultural region encompassing the state of Utah and southern Idaho. Previous studies over the past decades have shown a negative relationship between Christian religious affiliation and environmental attitudes, although the results have been somewhat contradictory. In addition, there has been no research that has examined the impact of belonging to the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS or Mormonism) on individuals' environmental concerns and support for related policies and programs. In recent years, however, leaders of various Christian denominations, including Mormonism, have made arguments that environmentalism is not only a religious worldview but is also mandated by scripture and doctrine (Brehm and Eisenhauer, 2006).

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints takes a different approach to environmental issues than other Christian churches. Instead of issuing formal statements or setting up environmental agencies, church leaders have chosen a more subtle and often overlooked approach. They incorporate environmental analogies or stories into broader doctrinal statements to encourage members to actively participate in virtuous pursuits. By encouraging individuals to 'care for the good cause', the church promotes environmental responsibility in a unique and thought-provoking way (Gowans and Cafaro, 2003).

To begin with, the planet and all living things belong to God; they are evidence, witness and reflection of His power and love for humanity. The Earth's resources must be used not only to meet human needs, but also to uplift the human spirit. All forms of life have inherent value because they are all products of God. All living organisms have a spiritual aspect beyond their physical existence, because they were created spiritually before they manifested physically on earth (England, 2001). Mormon theology plays a significant role in reinforcing the principles of environmental protection in Christian and other religious communities. The notion of stewardship is often used by these individuals to express their commitment to protecting the environment as a means of honoring the Creator. In this regard, Mormons have made

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a significant contribution to the development of eco-theology by offering a broad view of stewardship and responsible use of the Earth's resources (Handley, 2011). Among Mormons, who see themselves as connected to their ancestors and descendants, there is a strong resonance of the sacred responsibility to care for the Earth so that future generations can benefit from the same resources and opportunities as the current generation. While some may see the link between environmentalism and genealogy as tenuous, in fact both emphasize tools to create stronger intergenerational connections (Walker, 2014). The Church of Latter-day Saints, although originating in New York City and initially drawing its followers from the eastern forested states, is primarily known for its expansion and cultural influence from the more arid and less forested state of Utah. However, it is important to note that the church has not ignored or abandoned its historical origins in the forests of northeastern America (Allen and Arrington, 1969). Even though Joseph Smith and the Latter-day Saints left their homes with a vision of establishing churches and cities to foster divine communication and personal revelation, the fundamental visions and heavenly manifestations that laid the foundation for the modern-day restoration of the church and the gospel will forever be associated with the hemlock and northern hardwood forests of New York and Pennsylvania. These forests formed the boundary between the heavenly and earthly realms and served as the gateway to Restoration (Palfreyman, 2022). The Sacred Grove in Palmyra, New York, is highly significant as the place where Joseph Smith Jr. was visited by Heavenly Father and Jesus Christ in 1820, commonly referred to as the first vision. This significant encounter marked the beginning of a series of events that led to the restoration of the Church of Jesus Christ on earth. The Sacred Grove, originally part of the Smith family farmland, has now been transformed into a tranquil and thriving forest that can be visited year-round. Its winding paths offer visitors ample opportunity to reflect on the profound events that took place within its boundaries.

Islam

In the Qur'ân, the tree symbol is not given much significance, but it has gained immense importance among the mystics and in the realm of Muslim art and architecture. It has evolved into one of the most elaborate symbols of Islam. Interestingly, the Qur'ân does not mention the Shajarat al-Tûba, also known as the "Tree of Bliss," which is considered the Islamic World Tree. Instead, the Qur'ân describes various supernatural trees that hold their own distinct characteristics and symbolism. The integration of various trees into a consistent symbol is a unique feature found exclusively in the Hadîth and among mystics. Within the Qur'ân, there are three distinct supernatural trees that hold significant symbolism: the Infernal Tree, Zaqqûm, located in Hell; the Lote Tree of the Uttermost Boundary, Sidrat al-Muntahâ, situated in the Seventh Heaven; and the Tree of Knowledge, the forbidden tree found in the

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Garden of Eden. Additionally, a fourth tree, referenced in the Lamp Verse as the “olive neither of the East nor West”, will be addressed in due course (Moselle, 2015).

Islam, another monotheistic religion, has also been perceived as having a negative impact on nature, particularly in relation to trees. Similar to Christianity, sacred groves and trees were often destroyed or their sacredness diminished when lands were acquired by followers of Islam (Donner, 2014). Nevertheless, the sacred scriptures affirm the importance of safeguarding and cultivating trees, with the primary rationale being the advantages their preservation offers to humanity, particularly in terms of economic, social, and religious aspects (such as the presence of trees near revered burial sites, leading to their protection) (Frosch, 2010; Khan et al., 2008). Despite the reverence shown towards trees, it is important to note that not all Islamic scholars consider them to be inherently sacred. In fact, there are those who argue that trees cannot possess sacredness. This perspective is evident in the historical conquests where trees and forests were cleared as a means to erase and rebuild the cultural heritage of the land, disregarding any perceived sanctity associated with them (Wessing, 1999). Woodlands, however, play a significant role in rural regions throughout the Islamic world, serving as locations for burial grounds, hosting male circumcision ceremonies, offering blessings, and facilitating various religious rituals (Dafni, 2007). The cedar of Lebanon, known as *Cedrus libani*, holds significant importance as a tree. Similarly, the cypress, olive, date palm, and fig trees are also considered crucial within Muslim graveyards. It is believed that Allah has bestowed his blessings upon the olive and fig trees (Hossain et al., 2016). Kitagawa (2019) argue that the olive tree held significant religious importance as the axis mundi in the Islamic faith. One possible explanation for the presence of sacred groves of trees in rural areas could be the continuation of pre-Islamic (traditional) beliefs and practices even after the conversion to Islam, a phenomenon that can also be observed in the context of Christianity (Deil et al., 2005).

New Age Movement

The New Age phenomenon emerged in Western society in the early 1970s and encompasses a wide range of spiritual and religious practices. Its diverse and unstructured nature makes it challenging to provide a clear definition. While it is classified by some as a religious movement, its adherents often perceive it as a spiritual path integrating mind, body and spirit, and rarely identify themselves directly with the label "New Age". Others generally refer to it as a New Age movement, but alternative perspectives suggest that it is more accurately described as a cultural milieu or zeitgeist (Zeller, 2011). Over the last thirty years, New Age spirituality has had a significant influence on Western society. It has gained significant social influence, with approximately one in three Americans embracing various aspects of New Age ideology (Wessinger et al., 2006). The New Age movement, as a form of Western

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esotericism, was heavily influenced by various esoteric traditions. These included the occultism of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, which included the teachings of Emanuel Swedenborg and Franz Mesmer, as well as spiritualism, New Thought and theosophy. The movement also drew inspiration from contemporary sources such as the UFO fantasies of the 1950s, the counterculture of the 1960s and the Human Potential Movement. Although the exact origins of the New Age movement are still disputed, it gained considerable momentum in the 1970s, particularly in the UK. It then experienced widespread growth in the 1980s and 1990s, particularly in the United States. At the beginning of the 21st century, however, the term "New Age" began to lose currency within the community, and some scholars even argue that the New Age phenomenon has come to an end (Foote-Smith and Smith, 1996; Bader, 2003; Bartholomew, 2022). The New Age movement has gathered a diverse group of followers around two basic concepts. The first concept envisioned a New Age characterised by heightened spiritual awareness and global harmony, and an end to problems such as racism, poverty, disease, hunger and conflict. They believed that this social change would result from a widespread spiritual awakening among the population in the next generation. The second idea emphasised that individuals could experience a glimpse of the New Age through their personal spiritual development. The initial changes set the believer on a path of continuous growth and transformation known as sadhana (Tucker, 2002; Lahood, 2010). Establishing a systematic doctrine for the New Age movement proves to be a challenging task, given its eclectic nature, drawing inspiration from various religious and esoteric beliefs. Despite this diversity, New Age adherents share a number of overarching concepts. Proponents of New Age ideology claim that the essence of God and the cosmos are intertwined. This movement departs from the traditional monotheistic beliefs found in the Bible, opting instead for monism or pantheism. Adherents of New Age philosophy claim that there is a divine force that permeates all elements of the universe. In order to tap into this energy and restore personal vitality, the individual must harmoniously align with all aspects of the cosmos. The New Age movement advocates a wide range of methods to achieve this harmony and to regain inner strength, from ancient practices to contemporary techniques (Bauckham, 1996). In the pursuit of unity, adherents of the New Age movement advocate the use of both ancient and modern forms of meditation, seances, divination, numerology and magic. It is a common belief among New Age adherents that the use of yoga practices can facilitate their journey towards balance and unity with the universe (Dittrich, 2016).

In the New Age movement, nature, including sacred trees, forests and groves, has a significant spiritual and symbolic meaning. These natural elements are revered for their essential connection to the earth, their spiritual energy and their role in various spiritual practices (Timothy and Conover, 2006).

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New Age conceptions of nature are easily aligned with dominant ideas about nature in popular culture and mainstream environmental discourse. According to various critics of environmental culture, contemporary Western society perceives nature through a limited number of basic metaphors, such as nature as object or machine, nature as resource, nature as spirit, and nature as home. In comparison, New Age nature religion gives these metaphors an enhanced significance that is absent or marginal to more traditional interpretations. For example, the notion of nature as an object is transformed into the notion of 'sacred geometry' or 'sacred mathematics', while the idea of nature as a resource is developed into an understanding of nature as an organism or energy. Likewise, the metaphor of nature as home is re-imagined as 'mother', and the concept of nature as spirit takes on the role of 'teacher' or 'trickster'. These combinations and variations continue to proliferate within the New Age framework (Ivakhiv, 2003). These perspectives often intersect in different ways with scientific, popular and environmentalist ideologies. Many New Age writings adopt an anthropocentric perspective, seeing humans as a 'global brain' or 'Gaia's nervous system' (Russell, 1984). They emphasise our divine abilities and technological advances that allow us to exercise control over evolution (Hubbard, 1994). Gaia has gained considerable popularity as a symbolic representation among scientists and various spiritual groups. Scientists use Gaia as a thought-provoking metaphor to convey an overarching theory of the biosphere, while pagans, New Agers and others perceive Gaia as a divine entity or spirit embodying the Earth. Adherents of feminine and goddess spirituality recognize Gaia as a symbol of empowerment, while environmentalists see her as a personification of the harmonious relationship between humans and the Earth. In contrast, proponents of 'planetary resource management' and 'sustainable development' associate the concept of Gaia with a form of technocratic managerialism that views nature mechanically and sees it as a mere repository of resources for human exploitation (Katinić, 2013; Stengers, 2015). Moreover, New Age philosophy focuses not only on humans but on all forms of life, emphasising that human responsibility extends beyond our own species to the whole planet. It challenges the traditional view of the world as a vast machine. Instead, the New Age adopts a holistic and biocentric approach and sees the world as a unified whole (Pasek and Dyczewska, 2012). This approach is in line with the idea of pantheistic ecophilosophy, a concept usually associated with the green movement within the New Age. The Norwegian philosopher Arne Naess introduced the idea of ecophilosophy as a component of ecological ethics. It serves as a strategy to promote action for the preservation of life on a global scale by fostering identification with all forms of life on Earth, which we consider to be our mother Gaia (Protopapadakis, 2009). In 1972, while working as a professor at the University of Oslo, Arne Naess introduced the terms 'deep ecology movement' and 'ecophilosophy' to the environmental literature. His article was based on a lecture he gave at the Third World Futures Conference in

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Bucharest that same year. Naess discussed the long-term background of the ecological movement and its connection to respect for nature and the recognition of the intrinsic value of all beings. Naess conceived of the human as an integral part of the 'picture of the whole field' (Oelschlaeger, 2014).

The ecophilosophy of A. Naess T and the deep ecology movement has many similarities with Lovelock's concept of Gaia. Notably, both ideas have gained spiritual and (pseudo-)religious recognition and interpretation in some New Age circles. Both propose not only a cosmic interdependence of all beings, but also a form of holism that is linked to human identity (Barrotta, 2011).

Sacred groves and environmental protection

Conservationists consider protected areas as fundamental components in the preservation of biodiversity and as secure havens for wildlife (Kremen and Merenlender, 2018). Ever since the establishment of the inaugural national park in Yellowstone in 1872, a total of 104,791 protected areas have been designated globally, encompassing more than 12% of the Earth's land area ((UNEP-WCMC, 2024). The formal protected area network in numerous regions may never reach the internationally agreed-upon target of at least 10% coverage per region due to the combination of high population growth rates and conflicting economic interests for the limited land resources available (Williams, 2013; SCBD, 2022). The current protected areas system has been acknowledged to have two significant deficiencies. Firstly, there is a lack of coverage for certain crucial habitats and species due to their location on land that serves no other purpose. Typically, mountainous regions with low human population densities are prioritized, while fertile agricultural valleys with high population densities are frequently left out. For example, even though 23% of the Earth's tropical forests are protected, only 8% of cropland and natural vegetation mosaic habitats receive the same level of protection (Brooks et al., 2004). The current status of biodiversity representation within the established network of protected areas remains uncertain, resulting in a potential lack of protection for a significant number of species (Watson and Venter, 2017). Furthermore, the management of protected areas frequently proves to be inadequate in its efforts to curb human encroachment (Child, 2014). Out of the 31 579 protected areas located in developing countries, where a significant number of individuals still depend on natural resources for sustenance such as food, animal fodder, and fuel, approximately 30% are designated as strictly protected zones. These areas impose stringent regulations that prohibit any form of resource utilization or extraction (UNEP-WCMC, 2021; Leroux et al., 2010). The ineffectiveness of protected areas, despite significant financial and human resources allocated to them, is often attributed to the exclusion of local communities from these areas (Jepson et al., 2011).

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Indigenous local communities have relied on traditional knowledge for generations to oversee the management of natural resources in accordance with local laws, customs, and traditions (Phillips, 2016). The groves encompass a diverse array of fruit-bearing trees and small bodies of water, serving as a vital habitat for numerous avian and reptilian species. Sacred groves have a significant impact on the conservation of soil and water resources. These natural areas contribute to enhancing the stability of the soil in the surrounding region and serve as a binding agent for the soil particles. The extraction of resources within these groves is strictly regulated by a multitude of rules, aimed at appeasing the deity. Consequently, this meticulous management has fostered the emergence of remnants of mature forests, known as relict patches, within the groves (Singh et al., 2019). The preservation of cultural and biological diversity continues to hold significance in contemporary times as an effective approach towards conserving nature. Within rural communities where sacred groves are safeguarded, indigenous knowledge specific to the area reinforces customary conservation methods. The inhabitants have developed their own set of traditional regulations and strategies rooted in age-old customs, resulting in the preservation and upkeep of these groves as largely undisturbed forested areas due to their spiritual beliefs (Singh et al., 2017).

Agricultural landscapes often encompass natural sacred sites that are safeguarded by local customs and traditions. These sites hold immense significance and contribute significantly to the preservation of biodiversity due to their extensive historical background and the unwavering commitment of the local community to safeguard and preserve them (Zannini et al., 2021). The enduring conservation of sacred groves can be attributed to the deep-rooted conviction held by the local community that these groves are the dwelling places of their deities or ancestral spirits. Furthermore, they are regarded as havens for the diverse array of living organisms, encompassing plants, animals, and even humans. Plants residing in a forest or animals that venture into it are granted inherent protection by the deities, rendering them impervious to harm, destruction, or removal unless authorized by the guardians of the grove. The regulation of resource entry and usage in groves is supported by a range of traditional regulatory mechanisms. These mechanisms, which have been further strengthened by indigenous religious beliefs, practices, and taboos, consist of a combination of prohibitions and restrictions. These measures have been put in place to effectively manage and control the utilization of resources within the groves. Sacred groves serve as a distinct means of expressing human gratitude towards trees that provide sustenance and support life within a specific agroecological setting. In contrast to botanical gardens, which aim to educate and entertain through the collection and cultivation of diverse trees and plants, sacred groves hold a deeper significance in acknowledging the vital role of trees in our existence (Mahanty and Mazumder, 2023).

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Hence, it is imperative to focus on the restoration and effective management of sacred groves in order to safeguard the scientific ecological system. Developing a comprehensive understanding of the symbiotic relationship between plant life and wildlife will underscore the significance of SGs and contribute significantly to the formulation of strategies aimed at their recovery and sustainable management to uphold ecological equilibrium. The initial and most crucial measure to revive traditional values, practices, and beliefs among the younger generation is to prioritize the promotion of awareness regarding the significance of sacred groves. Additionally, it is essential to encourage benefit sharing within local communities as a means to conserve and sustain these groves. To ensure the long-term preservation and overall conservation of sacred groves, it is imperative to establish stringent legislation accompanied by appropriate punishments.

Conclusion

From earth-centered legal principles and ancient spiritual beliefs to rationalistic ideologies and organized religions, the concept of stewardship is evident in different forms, even if it is not always explicitly stated. The common thread of stewardship underscores the importance of recognizing and fulfilling our obligations towards the environment, regardless of the specific religious or philosophical framework within which it is articulated.

The inhabitants of this world have valid grounds to feel an increasing sense of apprehension, heightened anticipation of calamity, and a tendency to seek out cleverly devised scientific and legal methods to alleviate their worries. Disregarding the actual state of environmental decline and continuing to exploit natural resources without restraint represents the most irresponsible reaction to this situation. On the other hand, constructing intellectual frameworks that deny the assumption of human inadequacy, while lacking in certainty, demonstrates a more responsible approach. The most responsible and pragmatic reaction to the distressing condition of the planet involves embracing a faith-based commitment to personally and collectively assume the role of environmental stewardship. The religious viewpoint regarding environmental issues, encompassing environmental legislation, is based on the recognition of the absolute authority of God. Consequently, the idea that humanity is incapable of saving the world is considered valid, but the religious doctrine also asserts the clear obligation of humanity to act as conscientious caretakers of an imperfect world, which encompasses the environment, the ecosystem, and humanity as an essential part of creation.

Religious communities not only view a sacred forest as a site for conducting rituals but also recognize its ecological significance in terms of promoting harmony and sustainability. The primary objective behind sanctifying the forest is to ensure its natural preservation, enabling them to engage in rituals and utilize resources while upholding biodiversity. By examining the perspective of different religions, which do

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not confine the concept of sacredness to cosmic elements, the values and customs upheld by these communities are directly applicable to the sacred forests they revere. They perceive the forest as a living entity, deserving of respectful treatment to maintain its vitality. Despite the valuable insights provided in this study, there are notable shortcomings in terms of the depth of analysis and the comprehensiveness of the data findings. Moving forward, it is hoped that further research will address these limitations and offer a more comprehensive understanding of the subject matter.

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Összefoglaló. A fák és erdők hatalmas termete és tartós élettartama tagadhatatlanul mély hatást gyakorolt az írás nélküli társadalmak kreatív elméjére. Nyilvánvaló, hogy ezek a természeti csodák megragadták a korai civilizációk képzeletét, befolyásolva hiedelmeiket, hagyományait és kulturális megnyilvánulásait. Szerinte a világon a különböző vallási csoportok sok generáción keresztül megőrizték a szent erdőket és ligeteket, amelyekről úgy gondolják, hogy a spirituális jelentőségük van, vagy kifejezetten isteni entitások lakóhelyei. Számos ősi szent erdő maradt fenn a világ különböző régióiban. Ezek közé tartoznak az Etiópia hegyvidékein található templomerdők, az olaszországi katolikusok számára nagy jelentőségű domboldali ligetek, a japán szinto gyakorlók által mélyen tisztelt erdőfoltok, valamint a szibériai őslakos közösségek számára szent értéket képviselő erdők. A védett erdők a biológiai sokféleség értékes tárházaiként szolgálnak, és kulcsfontosságú menedéket jelentenek a régió más részein ritka vagy eltűnt növény- és állatfajok számára. E szakrális terek megőrzését kihívások elé állítja az éghajlatváltozás, a környezetszennyezés és az urbanizáció. Az évek során elhivatott gondozók, környezetvédők és kormányok vállalták a felelősséget e területek védelmében, de mostanra egyre nagyobb erőfeszítéseket kell tenniük védelmük fokozására.

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