Faces in the Trees

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Abstract

Consideration of tree worship was once central to theories of religion, which tended to view this practice as a primitive form of anthropomorphic animism that has no place in a civilized modern world. How might we regard tree worship once it is liberated from the cultural evolutionary views of the nineteenth century? Neem trees have long been associated with the goddess Shitala in Hindu religious culture. This essay examines the worship of individual neem trees in northern India, which in some cases involves clothing the tree and attaching a human-like facemask to it. Ethnographic evidence suggests that this remarkable form of anthropomorphic activity can be best understood as an intentional strategy for establishing more intimate relationships with the nonhuman world. Although it is not the explicit goal of most tree worshipers in India, this practice may serve as a possible resource for the preservation of trees.

The spirits of the tree and grove no less deserve our study for their illustrations of man’s primitive animistic theory of nature. This is remarkably displayed in that stage of thought where the individual tree is regarded as a conscious personal being, and as such receives adoration and sacrifice (Tylor 1958 [1871]: 300-301).

Yet a man--nature dualism is deep-rooted in us... Until it is eradicated not only from our minds but also from our emotions, we shall doubtless be unable to make fundamental changes in our attitudes and actions affecting ecology. The religious problem is to find a viable equivalent to animism (White 1973: 62).

Toward the end of the nineteenth century, the scholar J.H. Philpot published a book entitled The Sacred Tree in which she wrote: 'Now of all primitive customs and beliefs there is none which has a greater claim
upon our interest than the worship of the tree, for there is none which has had a wider distribution throughout the world, or has left a deeper impress on the traditions and observances of mankind' (Philpot 1897: 4). Consideration of tree worship was central to many scholarly theories of religion at the dawn of the twentieth century, and yet today sacred trees and tree worship have practically disappeared from the academic landscape of religious theory. Why is this so? In part, there is a simple answer to this question: the theories of religion so commonly accepted by most scholars at the beginning of the twentieth century have long been discarded by those interested in this endeavor today. And yet, after abandoning theories about religion routinely accepted at the end of the nineteenth century, might there still be something worth pondering about human possibilities in the case of tree worship?

Three scholars greatly influenced Philpot's understanding of the place of tree worship in religion: James G. Frazer, Robertson Smith, and Edward B. Tylor, who himself was influenced by Max Muller, David Hume, and Auguste Comte. Together these scholars had a tremendous impact on how religion was viewed in the academic world in Western Europe and North America at the close of the nineteenth century. Although there were significant differences among them, they shared an important idea: they all agreed that religion evolved from the personification of nature, and that tree worship is clear evidence of this. They also shared a developmental view of history that regarded such practices as tree worship as involving a primitive and ultimately mistaken stage of thought in which nonhuman life was viewed as being sentient, and had to be expunged from modern civilized thought if true progress was to occur. Tylor, the first Professor of Anthropology at Oxford and the one who coined the word 'animism', was enormously influential in characterizing primitive thought as that which ascribes spirit not only to humans, but also to animals, plants, and natural entities; in short, the primitive believes 'everything to be animate in the universe' (Tylor 1958 [1871]: 63). The question I would like to pose is: Can we return tree worship to our consideration of religion and productively revisit such related concepts as animism and anthropomorphism after liberating them from the crude application of the cultural evolutionary theory so prevalent in early scholarly analyses of religion?

What is a tree? Or perhaps we could ask: Who is a tree? The difference between these two interrogatives is significant—and culturally determined. The first typically signifies an inanimate object or a 'thing', whereas the latter signifies an animate being or a 'person'. The difference between these two, therefore, involves a boundary issue: how or if to
demarcate the animate and inanimate, sentient and nonsentient, human and nonhuman, or person and nonperson. Much is at stake in such distinctions.

The correct exercise of proper boundary maintenance that sharply divides these categories is the mark of the 'civilized' for Tylor. Animism—the belief that spirit is present in nonhuman life forms—is the very basis of 'primitive religion', according to Tylor. This distinction is, then, related to another boundary issue: the demarcation of the civilized and primitive. 'Animism', he claims, 'characterizes tribes very low in the scale of humanity' (Tylor 1958 [1871]: 10). The question 'Who is a tree?' would signal the presence of confused, primitive thought for Tylor, who has written: 'In discussing the origin of myth some account has been already given of the primitive stage of thought in which personality and life are ascribed not to man and beast only, but to things. It has been shown how what we call inanimate objects—rivers, stones, trees, and so forth—are treated as living intelligent beings' (Tylor 1958 [1871]: 61).

Although much of Tylor's evolutionary theory about religion and culture is no longer accepted, many of his ideas are yet assumed in the Western cultures he labeled 'civilized'; there are many today who agree completely with the sentiments expressed in his judgments of so-called primitive cultures. The notion that a tree is a sentient, animate 'person' with whom one can have a meaningful relationship is quite alien to most people in the West.

Whereas Tylor celebrates the establishment and maintenance of a sharp boundary between the human and nonhuman worlds, others more recently have questioned this very boundary and explored its negative consequences. Among them is Lynn White—a figure many would acknowledge as an important forefather of the emerging field of Religion and Ecology. White viewed the demise of animism largely in terms of the religious competition between paganism and a form of Christianity that became dominant in the Western Europe and by extension North America. In his now-famous article, 'The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis', he writes:

In Antiquity every tree, every spring, every stream, every hill had its own genius loci, its guardian spirit... By destroying pagan animism, Christianity made it possible to exploit nature in a mood of indifference to the feelings of natural objects... To a Christian a tree can be no more than a physical fact. The whole concept of the sacred grove is alien to Christianity and the ethos of the West. For nearly 2 millennia Christian missionaries have been chopping down sacred groves, which are idolatrous because they assume spirit in nature (White 1967: 1205-6).
The result, according to White, is that we now live in a dead world that is truly animated only by human beings. This opens up the possibility for excessive abuse of the nonhuman world with gravely negative environmental results. Whether White’s account of the role Christianity played in cultural moves away from animism is accurate or not, he contends—a full century after Tylor’s celebrated entrance into the progressively nonanimistic ‘civilized’ world—that much of the current ecological crisis is due precisely to the destruction of animistic world-views, and, as the epigraph above demonstrates, he calls for a return to some form of animism that will open us to a wider world of being and a greater sense of ethical responsibility. Obviously, White takes a very different stance from Tylor with regard to the issue of animism—with its concomitant sense of some manner of continuity between the human and nonhuman—and the mental condition of those who embrace it.

A reconsideration of animism and the notion of personhood among nonhuman beings raises another contentious issue: anthropomorphism—the attribution of human characteristics to nonhuman phenomena. (Not to be confused with ‘anthropocentrism’, the belief that humans are the pinnacle of existence, and therefore, the measure of all beings, which have value only to the degree that they are useful for human beings.) Although much resistance continues to be expressed by ethologists such as John Kennedy (1992), a great deal of headway has been made in the study of animal behavior by such figures as Jane Goodall (1988), Jeff Masson and Susan McCarthy (1995), and Marc Bekoff (2002) toward challenging the notion that anthropomorphism is a scientific ‘sin’. For it turns out from the perspective of current biology that humans and nonhumans do often have a number of characteristics in common. Biologists today even have difficulty deciding where to place a boundary between the living and the nonliving. In his book The Social Construction of Nature, Neil Evernden remarks: ‘Once we accept, through the study of Nature, that all life is organically related, organically the same through the linkage of evolution, then humanity is literally part of Nature’ (1992: 93). He then raises the significant question: ‘if humanity is “just” a part of nature, then what sense does it make to suppose that nature may not have properties similar to our own? What is the justification for the ban on anthropomorphism’ (Evernden 1992: 93)? It is becoming increasingly acceptable these days to talk about the sentience of animals. But do we stop with animals and maintain an ontological boundary here? What about other life forms—such as trees?

The author Louis de Bernieres has written a beautiful novel titled Birds without Wings about the blended Greek–Turkish culture of the west coast of Anatolia at the beginning of the twentieth century. Interestingly, it is a
novel that includes the seeking of blessings from trees: cloth is tied in red pines to secure a healthy life for babies. One day a powerful landowner in the book happens upon the town's imam talking to his beloved horse. When the imam apologizes, the landowner confesses that he talks to his pet partridge and cat. The imam replies: ‘Fortunately it is quite reasonable to confide in an animal. It’s when you do it to trees and stones that people call you mad’ (de Bernieres 2005:249). Indeed, while it is increasingly acceptable today to claim that animals have sentience, to suggest that trees too have sentience presses hard on cultural boundaries and opens one to the accusation of being ‘childish’, ‘confused’, or even as the imam says, ‘mad’—all terms formerly applied to animistic or anthropomorphic beliefs. Yet this is precisely the boundary that I traverse in this essay.

Figure 1. Neem tree shrine in Banaras

I spent most of a year in Banaras (Varanasi), the ancient holy city located on the bank of the Ganges River in northern India, researching the conception and worship of sacred trees at the many tree shrines of
this city. While focusing on the three most important species of sacred trees—pipal, banyan, and neem—I learned early in my research that sacred trees are regarded as either the abode or body of a god or goddess. I was in for a surprise, however, the day I ventured into a small temple off a narrow alley that one enters after climbing a steep set of stairs leading up from the river at Bhadaini Ghat in Banaras. Nothing I had heard or read about prepared me for what I saw inside this temple. The trunk of a neem tree had been wrapped in a decorative red cloth typically offered to a goddess and a brass human-like facemask had been attached to the tree at eye level (see Fig. 1). The eyes had been highlighted with a light pinkish paint and black pupils. A bright red dot of sindur powder was applied to the goddess’s forehead as a decorative bindi, and a tiny ring had been added to her nose. Garlands of marigold and jasmine flowers were draped onto the breast of the tree, and at its base was a small pair of raised white marble footprints. Although offerings made to the goddess of this neem tree were placed at the foot of the tree, when worshipers addressed the tree they typically looked into her face. I soon came to realize that this is a rather common way of worshiping the goddess of the neem tree, since I discovered dozens of adorned neem trees throughout the city. What these shrines render visibly apparent is that the neem tree is regarded as an embodied form of the Goddess.

The neem tree (Azadirachta indica; sometimes called 'margosa') is a tropical tree related to mahogany that keeps it leaves for most of the year. It grows in India, Burma, and parts of Southeast Asia. It is scarce in forests, but is common along roadways and around human settlements, and seems to be a tree that has flourished through human cultivation. Neem trees can live to up to 200 years and reach a height of about fifty feet; they provide very good shade and shelter. I have seen neem trees with trunk diameters around three feet; the bark on the trunk is rough and dark. The slender bright green, nonsymmetrical leaves of the neem tree are serrated and shaped like a scimitar. They branch off their stem in opposite directions and grow two to three inches long. In the springtime neem trees are glorious, being covered with small white flowers that emit a sweet jasmine-like fragrance.

There is archeological evidence to suggest that, along with the pipal tree, the neem was sacred to the early inhabitants of the Indus Valley, and was possibly even worshiped by them (Malla 2000:14-20). The neem tree is honored particularly for its healing abilities in early Puranic literature. The medicinal value of the neem is so considerable that it is often called the ‘village pharmacy’ and has accordingly been used in many health-related situations. ‘Renowned for its antiseptic and disinfectant properties, the tree is thought to be particularly protective of women and
children. Delivery chambers are fumigated with its burning bark. Dried margosa leaves are burned as a mosquito repellent. Fresh leaves, notorious for their bitterness, are cooked and eaten to gain immunity from malaria' (Patnaik 1993: 40-42). There is a long history of use of neem for medicinal purposes in Ayurveda that goes back thousands of years, and neem continues to be one of the most potent substances in Ayurvedic remedies. Stout neem twigs are used daily by many Indians, who chew on the end of the twigs to make bristles and brush their teeth with them, as neem twigs are known to contain natural substances that prevent cavities and gum disease. Because of the exceptionally effective results of neem in a wide range of medicinal uses, there is now increasing global interest in it. The inventory of the various illnesses, health problems, and pest infestations neem is used to prevent or treat is vast, including psoriasis, diabetes, AIDS, cancer, heart disease, herpes, periodontal disease, skin disorders, allergies, ulcers, birth control, hepatitis, fungi, malaria, external parasites, insect repellent, and insecticide (Conrick 2001: x-xi). Neem has been discovered to be so successful and potentially lucrative for the health industry that it has been at the center of recent WTO patent disputes.

The most critical use of the neem tree in traditional Indian medicine was for the treatment of seriously life-threatening fevers. Before the disease was eradicated by the World Health Organization, derivatives from the neem tree were used to treat smallpox in India. Smallpox patients were made to drink remedies made from neem compounds, their bodies were washed in a neem-leaf solution, and boughs from a neem tree were used to fan the patients to keep them cool. Smallpox has long been associated with the goddess Shitala, and the great majority of the neem tree worshipers I spoke with identified the tree as Shitala. Smallpox is no longer a threat in India, but Shitala maintains a connection with illnesses such as fevers and chickenpox. Although Shitala is still associated with various diseases, I found her to be much more than that for her worshipers.

People do indeed worship the neem tree as Shitala for protection from dangerous fevers, but this is not the only reason. A man who daily cleans the neem tree shrine described above told me that Shitala is a very compassionate goddess (daya devi). I asked him what he meant. He introduced me to his four-year-old son and narrated this testimony:

My son was born premature and was not healthy. The doctor told us he would surely die, but I prayed to this neem and because of Ma's kindness he lived. As you can see, today he is very healthy. This is due to the blessings of Ma.

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He then motioned toward two elderly women who had just entered the temple and said:

These women have come here to worship this tree every day for the last thirty years. Because of this they have lived full and happy lives, and their children and husbands have been safe, healthy, and well taken care of. The results of worshipping Ma in the form of this neem tree include receiving good food, good health, good family relationships, and overall happiness. Therefore, people also come here to thank Ma for the blessings she brings into their lives. She is particularly fond of red hibiscus flowers. Mother Neem takes good care of us.

A woman at this same temple later told me why she worships this neem tree. 'We get good health, peace of mind, and you can get your desires fulfilled by the goddess. She has been very good to my family, so I worship her every day'. Various members of the family that worship a neem tree in front of the house in which I lived in Banaras informed me that they worship this tree as Shitala for the general well-being of the family and for the 'blessings (ashirbad) of Mother'. A man I had observed one morning worshiping a neem tree by offering it water, hibiscus flowers, and incense told me that people worship neem trees 'to fulfill whatever desires they have. For example, some women come here to ask for a child, or if they are not married, a good marriage. But people ask for different things. I came here today just to honor Ma'.

While most of the neem tree worshipers I spoke with identified the tree as Shitala, for them Shitala is usually considered to be one of the many forms of the Great Goddess, the Mother of Life, who assumes a variety of manifestations to nourish all aspects of life. She is frequently addressed as Ma, Mata, Mai, or Maiya, all words that mean 'Mother' and that are commonly used to address a goddess within Hinduism. I met a man worshiping a neem tree at a temple on the pilgrimage circuit that encircles Banaras who informed me that the neem is a 'goddess-tree' (devi-vriksha). Although everyone I spoke with identified the neem tree as a goddess, there was no exact agreement on which form of the goddess she is. Many simply called her 'nima mai' or 'nimiyai maiya', a general name that means 'Neem Mother'. A popular Bhojpuri song sung in the region of Banaras identifies the mother goddess of the neem tree as the great goddess Durga, and petitions her to fulfill the worshiper's desire, in this case for a child. The identification of Shitala with Durga, the great

1. All interviews were conducted in northern India between August 2006 and July 2007 during a research period supported by an ACLS/SSRC NEH International Research Fellowship. This article is part of a larger book soon to be published under the title People Trees: Worship of Trees in Northern India.
goddess who takes many forms, is rather common in northern India. When I was in Bodh Gaya, I talked with two Hindu workers who were in charge of sweeping the main temple there. One told me: 'For us there are two sacred trees. One is a god (devata); the other is a goddess (devi). The first is the pipal; the second is the neem. The pipal is Vasudeva; the neem tree is Shervahani'. This name means 'She who rides a Tiger', and generally refers to Durga. But when I asked if the neem is also Shitala, this man said: 'Yes, they are the same goddess'. There is a neem tree shrine in the Chetganj district of Banaras called Shervali Nima Mai, Shervali being another name for Durga. Here too, then, the goddess of the neem tree is identified with Durga. But again, the theology of the Great Goddess in Hinduism is such that Shitala as the goddess of the neem tree is easily identified with the great goddess Durga. A man who established a neem tree shrine behind his sweet shop explained: 'This devi is Ma'. When I asked which Ma, he continued: 'Shitala or Durga; they are the same. The neem is the body (sharir) of Shitala, but you can also say that it is the body of Durga in her form as Shitala'. I talked with a priest of a Hanuman temple in Banaras about tree worship. After confirming that the pipal tree is Vasudeva, he asked me what I had found out about neem trees. I mentioned that I had discovered that the neem is regarded as Shitala. 'Not only Shitala', he informed me, 'but all nine forms of Durga. Some people regard the neem as Shitala, but others see it as some other form of the goddess'.

Most people in northern India regard the neem tree itself as an embodied form of the goddess; this is especially true of those who report they have a close relationship with a particular neem tree. Those who develop a close relationship with a neem tree typically consider it a svarupa of the goddess. The term svarupa is a technical one with a double meaning. It literally means 'own-form', and frequently refers to 'the form assumed by a deity' (McGregor 2004: 1050). Therefore, it can mean the specific form a deity takes in the world. Divinity within Hinduism is typically understood to be infinite and all pervasive, but manifests in particular concrete forms. Accordingly, divinity—although unified at the unmanifest level—can manifest as a multitude of individual beings. A particular tree being, then, is both specific and nondifferent from the Supreme Being. The term svarupa has another meaning, and that is 'one's own form of divinity'. The Great Goddess is everywhere and everything, but one's svarupa is an approachable concrete 'portal' into the infinite. That is, among the countless multitude of forms, this is the very particular one to which the worshiper is drawn and develops a special relationship with. The nature of human beings is such that we do not have close relationships with the abstract general, but rather with specific,
individual beings, and the more human-like the better for intimate
connection. The svarupa is that particular, individual form of divinity for
a particular worshiper. Tree worshipers do not tend to relate to a huge
number of trees, but rather a few, or perhaps only one that they can
connect with as an intimate individual. A specific neem tree as a svarupa,
then, is a particular physical form of the goddess with whom the wor­
shiper can develop a very close relationship.

In the small courtyard of a Kali temple not far from Tulsi Ghat in
Banaras is another temple dedicated to Shitala; before it stands a modest
neem tree shrine. One morning I watched a young man offer the tree
water, incense, red hibiscus flowers, and bright red sindur powder; he
then circumambulated the tree, and touched his forehead to it as he
bowed. I engaged him in conversation as he was putting his sandals
back on, commenting that people seemed to be worshiping both the tree
and the temple image. ‘Yes’, he said, ‘both are svarupas of the goddess.
One is a murti-rupa, the other is a prakriti-rupa. But both are the goddess,
so people worship them both’. The first term that he used—murti-rupa—
referred to the embodied form of divinity that had been installed in the
temple. It was a stone form that had been artistically crafted by human
hands, and the divinity had been invited into it by means of a ritual
procedure called the prana-pratishta (‘establishment of life-breath’). The
second term—prakriti-rupa—referred to the tree as a ‘natural form’ of
divinity that appears without the aid of any human intervention. This
man did not feel the need to evaluate these two forms, but merely con­
sidered both of them valid forms of the goddess. I met others, however,
who gave priority to the tree-form of the goddess. A man at another
Shitala temple explained: ‘The goddess’s power (shakti) is not actually in
the temple image; it is in the tree itself. The temple was built after the
neem tree was already here’. An auto-rickshaw driver I used for trans­
portation made the same point when we entered a Kali temple that had
just been constructed around a neem tree the year before our visit. Inside
the temple was a mature neem tree wrapped in ornate cloth with a
facemask attached to it. The tree was obviously older than the temple,
which led my driver to say:

See, the tree was here long before the temple. First there was the neem tree.
Alone, it was worshiped as the goddess. Then some devotees of hers
decided to build this temple around it and add a Kali murti for worship.
But the worship of the tree was first and is most important. The neem is
the first form of the goddess Shitala.

It is not uncommon to find a neem tree being worshiped by itself,
independent of any artistically crafted temple form of Shitala. This drives
home the point that the tree is the paramount form of the goddess. There
seems to be a progression in the development of neem tree shrines in Banaras. First is the instance of a neem tree being worshiped without any added ornamentation. The next stage in the development of a neem tree shrine involves dressing the tree in clothing suitable for a goddess. The final touch in the progression of a tree shrine is the addition of a brass or silver facemask (called simply a ‘face’ [mukha]). Very importantly, the facemask must have eyes. Eventually a temple structure may be built to enclose the tree.

The question I raise in all this is: What does one get out of placing a facemask on a tree that might not be there if this addition had not been appended? We might begin by observing that this is a clear case of anthropomorphism, but it is important to note that it is intentional anthropomorphism.

Anthropomorphism has been central to much thinking about religion. One of the early and most influential writers on the subject was David Hume, who in the mid-eighteenth century wrote:

There is an universal tendency among mankind to conceive all beings like themselves, and to transfer to every object, those qualities with which they are familiarly acquainted, and of which they are intimately conscious... trees, mountains and streams are personified, and the inanimate parts of nature acquire sentiment and passion (Hume 1992 [1757]: 12).

For Hume, anthropomorphism is a cognitive strategy for coping with the insecurity of living in a world of unknown causes; it is an application of what is familiar to what is unfamiliar. Although Hume is not without sympathy for those who utilize anthropomorphic strategies, ultimately for him their approach is a mistake representing a confused, primitive stage of human thought that has no place in the modern world and is to be replaced with rational science. Hume’s understanding of anthropomorphism as a cognitive strategy has been taken up more recently by Stewart Guthrie, who has produced a thorough examination of anthropomorphism in his book *Faces in the Clouds* (1993).

Guthrie’s own views on anthropomorphism go beyond Hume’s. For him, anthropomorphism is an effective and universal perceptual strategy that is not only at the root of all religion, but is fundamental to all forms of human perception. Guthrie claims that what is most significant in the world are other human beings, and when faced with an uncertain situation, we make a ‘good bet’ by assuming a human being is involved in that situation. This strategy, according to Guthrie, has served us well throughout our development as human beings. Anthropomorphism, then, is a reasonable interpretation of the world and ‘is normal, not aberrant; because it results from a strategy universal in human perception’ (Guthrie 1993: 64). Although Guthrie agrees with Hume and others who
view anthropomorphism as a cognitive strategy, he differs from them in that he regards it as an inevitable and effective strategy in all forms of human activity, rather than one to be abandoned on the march toward civilized modernity. But although it is reasonable and even inevitable, anthropomorphism, for Guthrie too, is still a 'mistake' of overinterpretation that must be corrected. 'We can label it anthropomorphism only after seeing it as an error. Anthropomorphizing animals, then, only shows once more that we tend to see human features where they do not exist' (Guthrie 1993: 183). In short: 'Anthropomorphism by definition is a mistake' (Guthrie 1993: 204).

While there is much to be applauded in Guthrie's understanding of anthropomorphism, there are limitations to his approach and his conclusions require some questioning, particularly in the context of the worship of trees in India. First, his concluding definition of anthropomorphism as a 'mistake' seems to contradict his prior efforts to demonstrate the problematic nature of any attempt to draw a clear line of distinction between human and nonhuman life forms. Moreover, it complicates his earlier and more straightforward general definition of anthropomorphism as 'the attribution of human characteristics to the nonhuman' (Guthrie 1993: 3, 62). It could be the case that humans and animals, for example, actually do share many characteristics. This is certainly the contention of current evolutionary biology. If human beings are a part of nature, then doesn't it make sense to assume that other beings in nature have properties similar to our own? Guthrie labors hard in his book to challenge the human–nonhuman divide that characterizes so many disparaging views of anthropomorphism and to demonstrate that so-called human characteristics are not necessarily limited to the human. Thus, attributing human characteristics to the nonhuman world—i.e., anthropomorphism—may sometimes be correct. Why, then, limit the nomenclature 'anthropomorphism' to refer only to mistaken forms of such attribution?

Second, while I acknowledge the insights Guthrie offers to an understanding of anthropomorphism as a 'perceptual strategy' in certain situations, I think that something quite different is often involved in other types of anthropomorphic activities. For Guthrie, anthropomorphism is 'largely unconscious' (Guthrie 1993: 187). But what about intentional acts of anthropomorphism? After correctly perceiving a tree as a tree, for example, neem tree worshipers in northern India proceed to apply a human-like facemask to that tree. That is, beyond initial perception, we find cultural instances of consciously cultivated and deliberate acts of anthropomorphism. Why? What is going on in these cases? Intentional acts of anthropomorphism strike me as involving something other than mistaken perception, and in the case of Indian tree worship, I think that
this something other moves us from a consideration of overinterpretation in perception or cognition into the realm of emotions. Tree worshipers in northern India report that they add faces to trees to relate to them better. Perhaps, then, anthropomorphism can be a consciously constructed and intentional strategy for connecting with the nonhuman world.

During my many visits to the Bhadaini Ghat neem tree shrine, I met the man who had attached the facemask to the tree and asked him why he did this. ‘Because’, he said, ‘this makes it easier for people to see the goddess in the tree and worship (puja) her more easily. It helps people develop a stronger relationship (sambandha) with this neem’. Over the course of my time in Banaras I asked many people who worship neem trees about the face on the tree. All agreed that it was done for puja, the Hindi word for ‘worship’. One woman said that it makes puja ‘higher’ (upar). She and the others meant this in two ways: First, this is done for the goddess herself. The face and ornate clothing are added as a way of honoring with beautiful things the goddess of the neem tree who appreciates fine dress. Several people told me that the ornate clothing and dress make puja more beautiful; the adornment (sringara) of a deity is certainly an important feature of Hindu puja. Second, the clothing and face are added for the benefit of the worshipers. It is done to make puja easier for them, as it allows them to envision the tree as a goddess with less effort and more intimacy. Perhaps most importantly, the clothing and particularly the face are added to facilitate a ‘connection’ with the goddess of the neem tree. A teashop owner who had placed a facemask on a neem tree near his shop told me ‘the face helps me connect (rishta) to the tree’. Several people drew my attention to the eyes of the facemask. ‘When I look into her eyes I feel very connected to Ma’, one man remarked. Many others said that the face made darshan more powerful and intimate. Darshan is central to much Hindu puja. The word literally means ‘seeing’, but is best translated as ‘visual communion’, for the seeing works both ways: one sees the deity and is seen by the deity.

During my research, I had occasion to talk with other people who had dressed and attached facemasks to neem trees. I asked the owner of a sweetshop who maintained a neem tree shrine directly behind his store, for example, why he had added a facemask to the trunk. ‘My heart told me to do this, so I did’, he responded. I then pointed out that not all neem trees being worshiped in Banaras had faces on them, and asked him what advantage there is to adding a face to the tree. ‘Yes, this tree is the same as those without a face. Ma is present in all neem trees. But it is easier to have darshan of Ma when there is a face on the tree. The face also makes puja easier, and it makes our relationship (sambandha) with
her more firm (mazbut). The face helps us remember her and keep her in our hearts'. Another man who had come to worship this neem tree expressed the sentiments of many: 'The face makes darshan of the goddess easier. The tree is the goddess, but it is easier to have a relationship (nata) with the goddess if a face is added. It is easier to see the goddess in the tree, or the tree as the goddess with a face on it'. I spoke with a woman who worshiped a neem tree daily that had a facemask attached to it. She told me: 'This neem tree is the Goddess. It is her body. Her face on the tree makes it easier for us to connect with her'. The point I heard again and again was that the face made a connection or relationship with the goddess of the neem tree more possible, more powerful, and more intimate. Three Hindi terms were used to in this context: sambandha, nata, and rishta. All three mean 'connection' or 'relationship', and are usually understood to signify a familial relationship between two sentient beings for the benefit of both. Facemasks are not attached to all neem trees, but when present they serve to enhance further the positive relationships people have with the trees.

The facemask also makes the personhood (vyaktitva) of a tree more obvious. A man who worships an adorned neem tree everyday explained: 'Shitala Ma is just like a person (vyakti). That is why people put a face (mukha) and clothes on her'. When I first began my research on sacred trees in Banaras, I asked people whether the tree they were worshiping had sentience or was animate (sajiv); whether it had consciousness (cetana); whether it had a soul (jio or atma); whether it was a person (vyakti) or had personhood (vyaktitva). After a while I stopped asking these kinds of questions. Not only did I always receive an affirmative answer to such inquires, but people typically treated them as so absurd that I began to feel foolish asking them. To ask someone who is worshiping a tree if that tree has sentience actually makes one susceptible to suspicions of madness. Trees in Indian Hindu culture are clearly assumed to be living beings—usually deities; as such, they are powerful 'persons' (vyakti)—certainly animate, sentient beings with feelings and consciousness with whom one can communicate and establish meaningful, mutually beneficial relationships. Here the human–nonhuman boundary is ontologically fluid. I, therefore, offer the following hypothesis from my ethnographic research for further consideration: The degree to which one sees personhood in some nonhuman being—such as a tree—is a highly significant element in determining whether one develops a close or mutually beneficial relationship with that being.

By way of conclusion I turn to consider what possible implications there might be in all this for environmental concerns. Although explicit environmental sentiments were rarely expressed by the tree worshippers
I interviewed in India, who tended to have a close relationship with a single tree or a few trees, there is clearly an implied ethics at work in the worship of sacred trees. No one I spoke with would dare harm or cut a neem tree, or any other sacred tree for that matter. When I asked one man if he would ever cut down a neem tree, he responded emphatically: 'Never! If I did Ma would be very angry with me!' I visited several sawmills in Banaras and asked the mill owners if they ever sold wood from a pipal, banyan, or neem tree—the three species of trees that formed the focus of my study. All insisted that they did not. In response to my question, one sawmill owner told me that 'these trees are pujaniya [a Hindi word meaning 'worthy of worship']. Therefore, we never cut or sell their wood'. The restriction from cutting sacred trees is often motivated by affection, or a general appreciation, for them. Many people reported that they were not worshiping a tree seeking some direct benefit, but rather they honored the tree to show their gratitude to it as a form of divinity that provides wonderful and essential life-supporting gifts. A man I talked with after watching him worship a sacred tree put it this way: 'Listen. We don't come to worship asking for anything in particular. Maybe some people do, but I am speaking for myself. I don't come asking for anything. I come just to honor God'. I encountered a woman worshiping a large pipal tree. I asked her if she worshiped this tree every day. 'Yes', she responded, 'this tree is Vasudeva [another name for Vishnu or Krishna]'. I then asked her what benefit (phayda) she derived from this worship. 'Benefit? I don't look for benefits. All is in his hands. I just honor him for all that he gives to me and my family. That's all'. And in a similar vein, a man I observed worshiping another pipal tree told me: 'I love this tree. He gives us so much. For this we are thankful. Why would we ever want to harm him?'

Fear also seems to be a motive for not harming sacred trees. I spoke with the owner of another sawmill in Banaras and asked him if he ever sold wood from a pipal tree. 'No!' he replied, 'Hindus are afraid of it, so we never sell it'. I later had a conversation with a manager of an upscale guesthouse in Banaras that was built so as not to disturb a large pipal tree worshiped everyday by numerous people. He told me that great care was taken to care for this tree during construction and to preserve it for a long time by placing a protective planter around it: 'If we would have cut down this tree', he reported, 'it would have destroyed our business'.

Many stories circulate about the bad luck that results from the abuse of sacred trees, especially pipal trees. One of the first of many I heard was from one of the Hindi teachers in the Landour Language School in Mussoorie:
A few years ago a man living in Dehra Dun ordered some Hindu workers to cut down a pipal tree for him on a Saturday. When the workers refused to do this, the man hired some Muslim workers to fell the tree. Within a year of this, the man experienced the loss of his son, his wife, his job, and all his money. People attribute his loss to the fact that he had a pipal tree cut down, and on a Saturday at that.

A man in Banaras told me of a man he knew who had cut down a pipal tree. Soon after this both he and his wife became sick and died. Another told me about a manager of an ashram who had a pipal tree cut down; within a year he too died. Such stories—whether true or not—are quite common.

Some Indian scholars explain the sacredness of and concomitant prohibition from cutting trees within Hindu culture as the result of an ancient strategy for preserving the environment. Bansi Lal Malla, for example, writes:

The main idea of our ancestors was to maintain the ecological balance in the environment. They appear to have been seriously concerned about this natural problem and its consequences... Our ancient Indians were not only concerned about the medicinal qualities of trees but were equally aware about the atmospheric changes, pollution and ecological balances. They, therefore, tried their best to save trees, particularly those which were held useful for the survival of humanity. Just to save these trees from various damaging agencies, trees were identified with gods and goddesses. Thus by showing different kinds of gains, merits, etc., our ancestors encouraged people to protect the trees, to organize pleasure gardens and to save the forests. On the other hand, by prescribing various kinds of punishments, which include a life in hell, attempts were made to protect the trees and forests (Malla 2000:82,116-17).

This argument strikes me as problematic, for it is a bit too Machiavellian, it is constructed out of a modern view of ecology, and it regards religious sentiment as an epiphenomenon of environmental concerns. On the other hand, the sincere notion of trees as divine beings with whom one can establish a favorable relationship with has a long history in the religious cultures of India.

Finally, I raise the question of whether the worship of specific sacred trees in India has any effect on consideration of trees in general in India. Can a worshipful relationship with an individual tree be the basis of an ethic that might extend to include all trees, perhaps even all life? The following words of the man who worships a neem tree behind his sweet-shop suggest that it might: 'I worship this particular neem tree as the goddess, but all neem trees are the goddess. In fact, all trees are the goddess'. The possibility exists within such an attitude of moving from the care for a particular tree to the care for trees in general. Although the
majority of people I interviewed typically only spoke of their relationship with a particular tree, one day I met a sadhvi—a female practitioner who had renounced ordinary domestic life to devote herself to spiritual pursuits—who was worshiping a pipal tree. I talked with her about my research and at one point in our conversation she explained to me what she thought was the real value of worshiping a tree.

From the heartfelt worship (hardik puja) of a single tree one can see the divinity (daiva) in that tree and feel love (bhava) for it. After some time, with knowledge (jnana) one can then see the divinity in all trees. Really, in all life. All life is sacred (daivik) because God is everywhere and in everything. This tree is a swarupa of Vasudeva. As it says in the Gita, from devotion to a swarupa (one's own particular form of God) comes awareness of the vishvarupa (universal form of God).

In brief, this knowledgeable woman was expressing something deeply significant: worship of a particular can open up to a more reverent attitude toward the universal. Regarding trees, her point was that the worship of a particular tree could lead to the realization of the sacrality of all trees—and by extension, of all life. Although it would be difficult to say exactly how such notions affect everyday behavior, this woman's views would not be alien to most tree worshipers in India. I had a discussion of tree worship one day with a man in Banaras while the two of us were watching a woman worship a tree. 'All life is a manifestation of God', he told me, 'so if a person sees God in a tree this is good. Let her worship that tree as God, knowing that God is in all beings. We should see all trees in this way and treat them with care'.

One of the central assertions of the emerging field of Religion and Ecology is that religious worldviews greatly shape attitudes and determine behavior toward the nonhuman world. In conclusion, let me say that it seems to me that whether one embraces the more all-inclusive viewpoint of the savvy sadhvi or simply develops an intimate relationship with a single special tree, trees certainly seem to be safer from the human axe within a religious culture that regards them as persons with whom one can engage in mutually beneficial relationships. In this sense, religion makes all the difference in the world for the health and longevity of a tree in an increasingly human-dominated world.

References


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