

Trees are sacred plants

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Opinion

This article explores the significance of sacred trees in the lives of modern and ancient people. An important aspect is the relationship with the tree and its sacredness.

Relationship with trees. In the ancient Lithuanian worldview, the forest has always been considered a special place: not only did it provide food and heal various health ailments, but it was also linked to the ancestral magical world of rites and rituals. It was believed that the trees were the place where the ghosts of loved ones were incarnated, and that a special relationship with them was created, and when houses were built, certain parts of the trees were placed in the foundations of the houses, which were believed to bring good luck and protection.

What is the significance of trees?

From a simple and practical point of view, wood has always been first and foremost a practical means of subsistence and a material - after all, virtually all of the most important tools and techniques that Lithuanians used to make were made from wood: the plough, the sledge, the wheels and the house (and it is interesting to note here that the ancestors were always aware of the fact that to build a house, one forest is cut down, while the ghosts of the ancestors reside in a different, sacred and sacrosanct forest). Secondly, the tree is very important in a medicinal sense - trees were used for a variety of medicinal remedies, as well as for the Lithuanian sauna and the vantha, which were made from the branches of the tree and were also used for healing. Tree parts, especially leaves, have also been used in cooking, such as fermenting and pickling vegetables. Thirdly, the magical significance of the tree: when, for example, the branches of a rowan, juniper, birch or holly were used to bless and consecrate the house with a broom, an ancient wreath, a sacred and special circumambulation of the whole house, the whole farmstead was practised. Many different areas of our ancestors' lives were connected with trees, and therefore their relationship with these plants was a special one, with not only practical but also symbolic, magical and religious connotations.

Our ancestors' particularly close relationship with this important part of nature is reflected in folklore: folk songs, fairy tales and folk stories. Here, we often see a boy called "birch", "oak", a girl called "spruce", "linden" - what better way to prove how precious a tree was to an ancient Lithuanian than to call a person by the name of a tree? There was also a tradition of sacred groves where burial by burning was practised. The ashes of the deceased would be buried in the grove and a tree would be attributed to the deceased, in the belief that the ghost of the ancestor dwells in the tree. And no stranger was allowed to enter the grove, let alone break off a branch. If a tree broke down or grew badly, it was said that the ghost had already left the tree and was going somewhere else - perhaps to another plant.

It used to be said that if any plant was picked or a tree branch was broken off, the first thing a person should do is to apologise to the plant,

because the plant has a soul just like a person, it feels and understands everything. That is why the relationship we build with plants is important and can only be nurtured by feeling, communicating, getting to know and trying to understand our surroundings. This should also be the case with trees.

Which trees are considered the most important and special in our folklore?

The oak tree was one of the most favourite trees of our ancestors - it was believed that the oak tree, not any other tree, was the abode of the gods. They, like bees, dwell in trees. And bees are the mirror of the soul of our ancestors. Even now, I can hear the old saying: 'the man who dug bees died, and the bees went with him'. Gone. The oak tree was also associated with the strength of man - it is the strongest, most powerful tree of all. By the way, since ancient times, trees with some kind of anomaly, such as knobby trunks, twisted trunks, crooked trunks, or strange growth, have been considered sacred, magical, with special powers, able to heal even paralysed people. The same goes for other trees that grow strangely, intertwined and mature, such as linden, birch, fir, pine and others. And now they are revered, sacred trees. For example, the Swieska Lipka in Poland is still venerated today, even though the linden tree is long gone, and people go to the ancient holy site, where a church now stands. The same has happened with the sacred stones, mountains, fields and lakes revered by the Balts. In 1910, women in Nemajūnai district (Alytus region) prayed at a two-stone alder tree, which a priest, after calling the police, cut down at night and burnt. The women wept and waited a long time for God to punish the police for burning the holy and miracle-working tree. A miraculous pine tree grew in Peiliškės village, Viekniai municipality. The monk Triušys had sick legs, and he vowed to fence the pine tree with a beautiful fence, and if he recovered, he would recover and keep his vow. At the edge of the Kiegrī forest, there was a huge pine tree with votives around it - it was considered magical. Like the ancient Indo-Europeans, the Lithuanians (Balts) associated their gods with specific natural objects and phenomena. Thus, the promoters of Christianity argued that the Balts, instead of worshipping the Creator God, worshipped the things she created - the sun, the moon, the stars, the trees, the animals, the plants. Christianity, unable to eradicate the

human custom of visiting, praying and sacrificing at sacred trees, assigned them patron saints and built churches and chapels near them.

It is important to remember that trees are an important part of Lithuanian folk medicine. Just by breathing and smelling, we can draw a lot from the tree.

For example, people with respiratory problems (such as asthma) are advised to simply lie under pine trees regularly and breathe in the healing aroma they give off. Every tree is therefore felt in one way or another. I have been involved in an experiment where we went to different trees with a group of people and each one of us said that we felt differently around one tree or another, that a birch tree, a linden tree or a dogwood tree brought different sensations to the heart. I think a lot depends on the person's identification with the tree, the willingness to get in touch with it. If you have the desire to communicate, you can really feel the tree.

You can talk to them, you can tell them what is bothering you. Here I would like to mention the example of the Lithuanian relationship with the garden, which played an important role in our culture. The apple blossom, which is a symbol of a woman's fertility, has been particularly important to Lithuanians, and especially to women, and it was mainly women who picked apples in the orchards. And it was not possible to cut an apple tree in one's own garden - it was believed that ancestors lived in the garden. In addition, newborn babies have always been called by the names of trees, which proves that people associate trees with certain positive qualities and sentiments...

We can use parts of trees for healing

All parts of trees can be used - roots, bark, buds, flowers, leaves, fruit - but it is very important to know which part to use and how to prepare it for use. It is not necessary to ask for too much, but to respect the gift we have been given - this is the basic rule when using nature's riches. If you take one or two branches off a tree, nothing will happen to it. It is best to use moderation, to take as much as you consume for yourself. It happens that you take a handful of blossoms, buds or other parts of the tree and when you get back to the machine and find that you have too much, you throw it away.

What are the best trees to plant, for example, in your own home or garden?

When I look at the latest gardening fashions and trends, I notice that people are planting a lot of exotic, non-Lithuanian plants to identify themselves with other countries, other cultures. And that's not a bad thing, but it is a bad thing to go through the experience of not having a mountain pine tree that doesn't grow, not understanding that it's not a tree from our forests, that it's not used to living here.

And there is a symbolic significance to having your own trees, so it has a completely different effect...

If we want to identify ourselves with the homestead where we live or spend our time, we need to know what trees grew on our ancestral homesteads. The elder tree (which has been displaced by the lilac) is one such tree. The elder tree was considered to be the tree that protected the whole farm, as it was believed that it was under this tree that Puškaitis, the god of the earth, of spring and of harvested crops (in the granaries), lived and looked after the whole farm. The elder tree was therefore usually planted in front of the outbuilding. The oak tree was an equally important tree in every homestead - it was like a lightning rod, which could be struck by lightning during a storm. It was an important protection for the home.

A tree was also planted when a child was born - each child in the family had its own plant. Spruce, lime, elder, elderberry, dogwood, snowball, birch, hazel and maple were the most important trees in every Lithuanian's homestead. This can be taken into account when planning your own homestead.

A Lithuanian's homestead could more often grow not fancy exotic plants (which, by the way, often need special care), but trees that have traditionally grown in the gardens of the ancestors of the ancients - oaks, lindens, birches, maples, spruces, elder trees, elderberries, rowan trees, and poplars. All of these trees play a very important role - each tree has its own purpose, character and qualities in Lithuanian traditional culture. To combat stress, it's especially useful to change your environment from time to time - the forest is the best place for this. Forest air is full of particles that we can't breathe in cities. Some of these particles are phytoncides - substances with antimicrobial properties that are secreted by plants. Trees are also said to be linked to human emotions and psychology, so that, for example, interacting with a pine tree can evoke feelings of security and care, oaks stimulate the imagination, give us strength and confidence, and a walk in a spruce tree can make us feel invigorated.

Nature is a world that I am constantly trying to explore. It is our life. We humans have been around for tens of millennia, and nature for millions, maybe billions of years, so we can only imagine how many of nature's mysteries we have not yet solved.

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