

An Ethno-cultural and Archaeological Review: the Retrieval of Origin of Banyan (Pipal) in Iran and India

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Received: October, 12, 2016

Accepted: December, 23, 2016

Abstract: A tree is interpreted as the sign of friendship, peace, knowledge, and prosperity in cultures and myths of the world nations. Since early time, the tree has maintained its importance status in the ritual, religious, and national beliefs of Iranian people. Of such respectful trees in Iran are cedar, pine, grape, and sycamore tree. A tree is grown in offshore of The Persian Gulf and The Oman Sea which is named “Korek” in local language, and it is similar to a tree which is popular in Indian Subcontinent as “sycamore of temples” or “Pipal”. This tree has a long life and more often is planted in vicinity of shrines. In Indian Subcontinent, according to Buddha, this tree is the holiest plant and according to Hindu, is the symbol of “Vish’nu”. The followers of Buddha believe that Buddha is reached to truth and light under the shadow of this tree. In Iran also this tree has religious worth and people bring in their alms and vows in order to fulfill their promises in return. With using of the printed sources available and observations in Indian culture, the main goal of this article for drawing such question is the comparison between ritual similarities of this holy tree in Iran and Indian Subcontinent. The necessity of comprehending of such issue help to perceive and unraveling the cultural roots in both regions.

Keywords: Archaeo-ethnology, Cultural anthropology, Iran, Indian subcontinent, Buddhi Gaya.

Introduction

The history of symbolism shows that the stuff around us, alive or not, could find symbolic meanings. According to Carl Jung “myth is the human transformation in object” (Barahani 2001). Humans often create symbols when they approach the nature. They give the symbols a psychological importance up to the point which makes them religious or artistic identity. The history of world from the very remote times has always been involved with religion and art; this is why symbols were important to our ancestors and excited them (Jung 1964) then it is reasonable if we look into this symbol critically.

In this research the authors aim to explore the practical shared rituals in cultural domain of Iranian civilization focused on Temple Tree which progressively and during the history has changed to be a mythical symbol that needs more attention and interpretation. We believe that:

This belief has started in eastern Indian area then found its way into south and south east of Iran.

The national roots and first shared birthplace of people in Iran and subcontinent strengthens this hypothesis historically.

The abundant presence of Indian forces of British army in south of Iran in the beginning years of the twentieth century and the immigration of some Sikhs to this area helped fortifying this belief.

This research is done by having an eye to these concepts and by the fact that Iranians and Indians were of one nation before entering their current lands lived in the same territory hence believed in same concepts and shared rituals and traditions, also we have made use of personal observations in both countries and review of documented sources such as Avesta and Vedas.

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Many people consider tree without any secret or difficulty to understand, something which could easily be known as a normal element of nature and reveal its inner components. Maybe it is why that it has been under suitable consideration. The outer layer of tree has covered it and makes it look easy to understand while its roots are being watered from profounder perceptions and leads to learning, knowledge and theosophy (Poorkhaleghi 2002: 2).

Material and Method

In this article we have tried to review the symbol of tree and its cultural values with emphasis on the pipal tree which is found abundantly in south of Iran especially in Kish and Qeshm islands and in the subcontinent of India. This study aims to detect the roots of mythology about this tree by reason and review of beliefs of our ancestors about "Holy Trees". Our goal is to open a way into mythological thoughts and to show their symbolic and cultural values. We have tried to recreate some obscure angles of the domain of Iranian civilization by review of different books and documents and by exposing the symbolic aspects of tree.

Faith in the Holiness of the Species of Tree in Iranian Beliefs

Iran and the subcontinent of India both as domains of mythology and "Indo-European" and "Indo-Iranian" cultures have always had a role in recreation of natural marvels into abstract forms and figures. They have reconstructed the magic and sanctity of supernatural. In their historical memory the species of tree has always been an emblem of these traditions.

Based on shared concepts in world of mythology the life giving creator normally creates the first man from soil or earth, clay, "tree", or plant (Rosenberg 1994). Therefore, tree has an especial seat in the historical memory of mankind. In the system of humans' perception of world tree is the basic symbol of life and the connection of earth and heavens. It is interpreted as the pillar of universe which resides in a green space. In pre-Zoroastrian periods in Iran tree was admired as a sacred emblem of life. Moon is shown as a tree on a mountaintop in drawings left from that period (Poorkhaleghi 2002:11-12). There are different legends about trees among different nations but all talk about one unique concept, although they are different in form but share lots of similarities. Among them the stories related to the miracle of trees that are somehow related to mankind are considered as special. The faith in trees as a symbol of eternal life found its way into temples from the Sumer civilization. The Greek believed that when the gods want to do a favor for someone they appear as trees or transform him into a tree. It was very customary to sacrifice

for a tree or make a vow for trees which were attributed to gods or other sacred ones because they believed that death is the birth of life. This tradition is still alive among most societies. Because worshipping the trees and plants is a kind of loving the nature then plants were cultivated on the graves as well; a tradition that is still prevailing. In all the ancient religions it was normal to take produce to temples sharing them with others as a thanks giving token to the gods who represented the trees and plants (Hamidi 1990: 362). In Iran with a tradition of tribalism culture for hundreds of years, tree was praised as a sacred symbol. Tribes which were always in fight and travel to find grass for their herd needed trees to anchor down and grow roots as settlements. Praising the trees however was dependent to the tribal culture. Iranians love trees and gardens. Balkh (Baak or Baaq), Gang Dej of Siavash (the earthly paradise), Taq Bostan, Bistoon, Takht Jamshid (a garden of stones) were all examples of earthly paradise (Kavir 2008; Montazer-alhojjat *et al.* 2010: 83).

In ancient Iranian culture whatever that is created by god is clean and amiable and trees as a sign of the will of unique creator on earth had specific character and rate. Iranian culture considers trees as a sign of life, creation and fertility. Ancient Iranians believed in an angle who got angry if a tree was damaged (Montazer-alhojjat *et al.* 2010: 80-87; Kavir 2008:1).

Based on the Zoroastrian faith in ancient Iran, Amordad of Amshaspandan is an angle that guards the plants. In Avesta it is an arch sin to damage a tree. Zoroaster considered cultivation of trees as a good deed. Zoroaster believed that if someone cut down an old tree one of his siblings would die (Poorkhaleghi 2002:124).

In ancient Iranian culture tree was considered as important as a connection between the earth and the skies. In addition to that, the fertility and life-giving aspects of tree were also admired. This is why the tree of life is a tree with figures of several sacred saplings with different branches and leaves which in Iranian and Indian civilizations or even throughout the world is a sign of growth and blessed fertility. The symbolic role of tree of life normally is depicted between two priests or animals (like goats, lions, etc.) who guard it (Bruce 1990: 4-9).

It could be said that the figures of plants are the most repeated sub-elements of pictures among the artistic depictions of human civilization especially of the religious art. No doubt that the symbolical shape of these figures are among most intricate and various symbols of humankind, the world of plants is the birthplace of living reality of life which renews periodically.

In Islamic arts the plants figures and tree of life have an exceptional foundation and are depicted in form of the Tuba tree. These are only the meaningful figures found in mosques. The most abstract and at the same time the most modest form of life is found in plants. This is why this

most spiritual form of life is allowed to be present in sacred places and specifically in Muslim structures. It is even accepted that the most important motives of Islamic art like the geometrical shapes, Arabesque (Islamic) and Khataeis (attributed to Khta, a Mongolian tribe in northern China, in 9th. Century, a combination of flower, buds and leaves art) have plants origin. Muslims normally paid special attention to plants because of their colorful delicate and fragile forms. Maybe these vegetation forms are symbols of the faithful people who are trying to emancipate their souls through spirituality. The circle of life and the eternity of the souls of the faithful is one of the most internalized concepts of the plants figures in Islam. Creation in the beginning, living in the world, birth and death (in plants) which thrives to grow and liberate toward the sun the source of light which a plant always need to be alive. Tree is the emblem of growth and time, the secret of eternity and defiance of death. In Islamic Iranian arts and the Indian Buddhist arts in addition to economic importance the vegetation also has a suitable role in ideology and the framework of visual arts (Ramezankhani 2008: 36). Plant is also the insignia of mankind that has roots in soil and heads up towards the heavens. The mankind just like the plant is a connection between earth (the materialistic life) and skies (the spiritual life) and religion is a carriage which aims to fortify and maintain this connection.

In conclusion of this part, the species of tree and not only the temple tree (as it is in Indian belief) is respected in Iranian faith. In the sources used, there is no mention of the temple tree or any faith to it in Iran before the entrance of Indians in Iran.

The Tree of Life

The figure of tree is one of the most recurrent elements which is repeated in Iranian and Indian/Buddhist culture and civilization remnants (Basham 1997). In the cosmology of both civilizations tree in its oldest image and based on the essential mythology of both nations is a colossal heavenly tree which holds the secrets of universe and creation. The top of this tree covers the entire roof of the sky and its roots are scattered all over the earth. Its vast and strong branches are spread in the world and its heart is the place of blaze of fire. One of the oldest songs of the world is found in Mesopotamia which admires this tree and its creation as: its root which is crystal and blazing goes towards the deep sea, its base is in the earth and its branches and leaves are the sleeping bed of goddess (Basham 1997).

The tree of universe, which is the base of universe; connects earth to the skies and is a witness of desire and sorrow for a period that in the beginning of creation the earth and the heavens were together. In Mesopotamia the tree of life is a mixture of different vegetables that was considered as sacred because of its long lifespan and

beauty. Like the cedar tree (Oveisi 2005) that its wood is valuable and its leaf is medicine, palm yields dates, vine with cluster of grapes is a sign of blessing of life as the pomegranate is the secret of fertility and its fruit is pregnant with hundreds of seeds (Farhadi 1993: 329-330).

The Temple Tree and Folklore Views in South of Iran

In the real world, Lur and the pipal are two different but beautiful trees. Lur or Lul as they call it in Bushehr (a city in south Iran) with scientific name of *Ficus Bengalensis* is from the family of *Noraceae*. It looks a nonindigenous tree that has entered Iran from eastern India at the period of Portuguese invasion (Cultural Heritage Organization of Bushehr 2010).

Significant similarities between Lur and pipal (Chand 1936) which is called Religious *Ficus* makes people have problem in differentiating between them. The Lur tree is a huge tree with latex rubber secretion that grows in southern Iranian ports and islands (Cultural Heritage Organization of Bushehr 2010).

The Lur tree which is known as the banyan, is a tree with a lifespan of more than one hundred and fifty years which was brought to Iran by an unknown man from Indian Bengal and cultivated in the midst of a green yard in city center. During the years and by local beliefs this mystic tree is shrouded in a halo of sanctity. Legends about its mystical powers to perform miracles and answer to pleadings has grown like its plentiful branches and leaves to every corner and rooted into the minds of ordinary people. Then gradually a shrine has been built for it and it has found some attendants turning to a complete sanctified presence and a symbol of public belief and the spiritual and social power.

This tree, in the public belief of people in south of Iran, is the remedy of all incurable diseases. People seek it to solve their problems and humbly bring their pains to it. They light candles for it and lament and vow. The suppressed ones connect themselves with chains to this tree. Nobody dares to say a word against it or denial of its so called sanctity. Nobody dares to limit its growth; the prejudice residents of the city blindly just believe in it. They kill any sound against the mystical powers of this tree. If somebody dares to cut some branches or limit its growth, he will be severely opposed (Cultural Heritage Organization of Bushehr 2010).

The banyan tree however is a second degree Lur tree with inedible fruits, it's a tree with a bunch of branches and normal roots and trunk that will dry if finds no water for two days. It grows fast and uncontrolled. Its open to air roots will spread and bear leaves and branches as soon as they hit wet soil. Maybe this rapid cancer like rate of growth is the reason behind its mystical powers in mind of people and has given it magic supernatural and holy unknown ritual

characteristics (Cultural Heritage Organization of Bushehr 2010).

The species of the banyan (Lur) in Kish island, is like a very precious treasure which is attractive and beautiful, which people guess with an age of about 500 to 600 years. On its trunk there are several bands knotted that gives it a holy figure. The locals believe that this tree has a good omen. The banyan tree or Lur is the most famous tree of island.

On the other hand, in Buddhist culture the Pipal tree or the Indian fig (Thapar 1966: 75) is in fact the very same banyan tree which has a special seat in Buddhist ontology. When the prince Siddhartha Gautama after so many years of austerity and deep pondering sitting by a tree in Bodhi Gaya some 100 kilometers away from city of Patna in Bihar province north of India, passed the Bodhi Sattva and got illuminated by the light of Buddha, he was blessed by the holiness of this tree (Kosambi 1970:50).

The Bodhi tree in Bodhgaya is located about 100 kilometers away from the city of Panta in Bihar province of India and it is said that Siddhartha Gautama was illuminated after a long ponder under this tree (Basham 1987: 468). The leaves of this tree in Buddhist paintings are depicted as hearts and on some etchings in caves represent Buddha. Ancient Buddhists believed that all fig trees were rooted from the main branches of Bodhi Gaya. They even believed that the most famous Bodhi tree in Anuradhapura in Sri Lanka is rooted by that very main tree. It is believed that the famous Anuradhapura tree was cultivated in 288 B.C. by taking a branch of the main tree at the 12th year of rule of Asoka (232-273 B.C.) of the great emperor of Maurya (321-185 B.C.) (Tavassoli 2015: 30) dynasty and now is the oldest banyan tree in that country.

The Sanctity of Tree in Iran

As said before tree has a deep root in the minds of different nations and societies so that a halo of sanctity surrounds it. The mankind has always been admiring the species of tree and of course it opened a door for superstitious beliefs. Each nation has a more respected tree in contrast with other trees based on its geographical climate. As in Iran Sycamore, cypress, cedar and palm are very praised (Oveisi 2005).

Islam, as our religion, prohibits worship of any tree, Idols, totems and all kinds of superstitious practices and beliefs. However, Islam looks at all the good phenomena and all the creations of god as worth thinking about. In the Holy Quran, Almighty God talks about various trees and represents them as the symbols of the power of God and as a sign for mankind to think. In Islamic culture tree is repeatedly known as the emblem of life and a representative of the blessings of God. The very auspicious chapter of Tin, verse 14, we read: «والتين و الزيتون و طور سينين» / And by

the fig and olive and blest Tor” or in the auspicious chapter of Alrahman, verse 6, God says: «والنجم و الشجر يسجدان،» / The star and tree prostate for God” or in the story of Moses we read that he talks on the Tor mount with a tree that is the epiphany of God.

Maybe this is why that so many mausoleums are built close to old trees such as cedar in south of Iran. Some of these places are called peer or Old. Peer in its sanctified meaning has a Manavi root (attributed to Mani, 216-276 A.D., an Iranian prophet and the founder of Manichaeism) and maybe is a derivation of Parika changing to peer in Farsi. These are in fact the souls of trees and springs that have a very ancient form (Bahar 2002: 315, Moein 2001).

Still in so many palaces in Iran especially in villages, some old trees are found (like the old cedar of Abarqoo in Yazd) that people refer to. These trees are believed to be able to make rain, make the sun to shine more, fertilize the sheep and help women in delivery and eventually perform miracles (Oveisi 2005).

Principally there are relations between prophets and trees. More or less in stories about the religions and traditions there are stories about this relation. For example, in Buddhism it is believed that Buddha was connected to Nirvana under a pipal tree or that the pipal tree is the very tree which Adam and Eve for the first time covered themselves with its leaves. Eating the fruit from the forbidden tree expelled Adam and Eve from the garden of paradise. In the stories of the Holy Quran also there are some such concepts of this connection such as the Junes the prophet rests and eats under zucchini plant that god put in his way after he was released from the belly of fish. Moses talks to a tree on the Tur mount which is epiphany of God. The holy prophet of Islam while ascending sees a cedar tree. Ansari writes: “The name of Cedar or Sidr tree and its fruit in Persian language is Konaar. The name of this tree mentioned twice in the Holy book, Quran. The Almighty has promised to reward the righteous slaves to take relax beneath the shadow of cedar. It is said that Imam Sadegh has remarked everyone irrigates a cedar tree, giving food to a hungry. The leaves of cedar tree is one of the religious orders that are used in washing a Muslim dead” (Ansari 2000)

Iran is facing drought from years ago. In addition to that different tribes and nations have always invaded this country ruining the land and villages, the eight years of imposed war against Iran an example which caused all the total annihilation of farms and palm trees in south of Iran by the Ba’th Iraqi army. As it is documented in books and reserved sources (chronicles and travelers’ diaries and books from the early history of Islam till now) it has been a hard job to maintain the security and tranquility in this country. Then trees which have been the fire logs, provided food and fruits, shadow, and liveliness is the respected emblem of relief and convenience and the

sense of belonging to a land. Then it is not strange if we see much figures of trees on clay, rugs, fabrics, stone and pictographs, engravings on historical buildings that all are signs of sanctification.

We should not forget that what is approved by Iranians in their beliefs about tree is the species of tree and not a special kind of it. As we see several kinds of trees such as cedar, cypress, pomegranate etc. are talked about in books. However, in Indian beliefs there is an emphasis only on a special tree that is known as Pipal or the Indian fig or the banyan tree. The myth of this tree in Iran is not older than one hundred years when the Indian soldiers of the British army first invaded south of Iran then some immigrants entered south and south east of this country and it looks like that they have brought this tree from west Bengal. On the other hand, cultivation of this tree in Iran gradually lead to a culture of holiness about it among the people in south and south east of Iran.

Holiness of Tree in Hinduism and Buddhism

People of India and the followers of Hindu and Buddhist religions respect the tree as one of the representations of nature, they respect the tree so much that before cutting a tree out they apologies and ask for forgiveness. This is very much like the American Indian culture of respecting the nature. The holiest vegetation in India is the holy fig which is the representative of Vish'nu (Kosambi 1970: 110). This tree is also respected by Buddhists because they believe that Buddha was sitting under this tree when he got illuminated.

Buddha spent the next seven weeks in different locations around the tree pondering about his experience. There are some different and special spots around the Mahabodhi temple that are related to the traditions and events of these seven weeks. The first week; he spent sitting under the Pipal tree contemplative. The second week he stood up and looked at the tree. The Animushka dome has been built in this place reminding this event. There are also statues of Buddha gazing at the holy tree. In the next weeks Buddha walked between the Animoshka dome and the holy tree. Based on the stories this path which is now known as the "Jewelry Path" is covered with lotus flowers (Kosambi 1970: 110).

All over the subcontinent of India even in Muslim country of Pakistan, wherever there is an old tree, a small temple or a *Saggakhaneh* could be found for praising god or lighting a candle, or there is a green or black flag raised. This is a concept with ancient roots and believed by public.

In a village near Inamgaon (60 km from Pune, India) is an old tree that when the soil around the tree is removed some wooden statues of a cows and the Scarecrows appear. These are gifted to the tree by villagers to repel the enemy and to stay safe (authors' observation). The same could

be seen abundantly in most villages and along fig trees or other old ones.

Nevertheless, it was very customary to sacrifice for a holy tree or donate gifts to trees attributed to gods until before the Christ. Thanking God especially for trees and vegetation has roots in all religions. The tradition of sharing the harvest amongst people after thanks giving to gods and temples is still practiced. Nowadays a transformation of such behavior could be seen among Jews. This tradition was also observed by ancient Armenians. It has changed in form during the history but is still considered as one of the celebrations among Armenians. After praising god and asking for forgiveness the ceremony of blessing grapes was performed in an elegant manner. In the past, they would do it in vineyards and people believed that after the blessing of grapes a share should be considered for birds. This is why grapes were hung from some very high branches of trees for birds. The people of subcontinent and also Iranian gardeners leave some fruits on trees as the share of birds so that next year they would gather more and better fruits. Zoroastrians are faithful to the same tradition with the same philosophy that believes pomegranate and grape trees are superior to others. They believe that pomegranate is the symbol of fertility of humankind. The mystic life of trees the elegance of living for so long, fertility and so many other characteristics of tree made people think about them as gods and goddesses and this is why the trees are considered as holy creatures (Yahaghi 1996:1).

Results

The history of pipal in India and the fig tree in Iran is as old as the history of both countries and we could not spot an exact date for it. The ancient beliefs of both nations with an emphasis on historical mythology of India and Iran about vegetation and trees show its deep roots in the relation of both nations.

In this research it is revealed that the banyan tree (pipal) in India is different in shape of trunk, leaves and open roots from the Iranian fig tree. Although the belief in both countries is almost the same about the two trees. As it was said, about a century ago the tree has been brought to and cultivated in Iran along with the public belief and culture about it. This event was not new, during the history Iranians and Indians have changed vegetation and trees. Trees such as pomegranate, mango etc. were taken to neighboring countries by the order of rules and commanders.

Discussion and Conclusion

The unchangeable fate of two major Aryan nations of Iranian and Indians according to Avesta was to migrate from colder north territories to the warm south lands and in this process they settled in two vast regions of now Iran and

India. As they separated in geography they reserved some of their old shared traditions and legends. However, parts of those beliefs were either changed or forgotten during the passage of time. The researchers however show us some shared aspects which we talked about but there is nothing about the details of our topic. The main question in this research was to explore the roots of the fig of temples and that how the myth about it was formed in southern Iran. This is a new discussion which has been neglected before this essay.

The myth of tree especially in Iran with emphasis on Zoroastrian beliefs and later Islamic faith in support and cultivation of trees turned to an emblem of growth and eternity and eventually connection to the perpetual paradise and unity with the one god. On the other side, in India in the beliefs of our Aryan cousins, pipal or the Indian fig tree was an emblem of freshness and purity and eventually emancipation and reaching to Nirvana. Later on in the twentieth century (1915) with the entrance of invaders and Indian immigrants to Iran this tree was brought to south and south east regions of Iran; Hence, gradually its culture started to spread. The kinship of Aryan people and having the same roots in their mythology were the reasons behind acceptance of this rituals in south and south east of Iran. People started to accept the Indian beliefs in an extent that they continued and supported them. As a result, it could be said that the roots of rituals of banyan tree in Iran and India are the same and that is the believe in the signs of god in earth that ordinary people use as a middle party between them and god. Unfortunately, there is no documented source about the history of the banyan tree in Iran and the only evidence is the very existence of these few trees which tell about their own history. However, it is obvious that the fig tree of temples is not indigenous to Iran but it is imported. The shared cultural similarities between Iranians and Indians caused some apparent connections in faith among the people of both territories.

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