

## **The Axis Mundi: A Cross-Cultural Exploration of the Symbolism of the World Tree**

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There are many symbols which identify the center of the world. These symbols are quite numerous throughout many different cultures. It is important to each group of people to have their own world-view as to where everything else revolves. Another function of the axis mundi is that it is the means of communication to the spiritual realms. In the quote below, Eliade points out that there are various symbols which are used to symbolize the “World Tree”, which is a symbol itself:

If we try to achieve a general view of all the myths and rites just briefly reviewed, we are struck by the fact that they have a dominant idea in common: communication between heaven and earth can be brought about—or could be in illo tempore—by some physical means (rainbow, bridge, stairs, ladder, vine, cord, ‘chain of arrows’, mountain, etc., etc.). All of these symbolic images of the connection between heaven and earth are merely variants of the World Tree or the axis mundi. (Eliade 492)

As an archetypal symbol, the tree represents the center of the world for many cultures. It takes on various forms and different types, but main idea of the “cosmic tree” or “world tree” remains constant. The world tree, acting as the axis mundi, connects the heavens to the underworld. Energy moves up and down the axis mundi, ascending and descending into the heavens and into the underworld. The branches of the tree reach out into the infinite heavens and connect to the gods of the sky. The roots of the tree reach down into the earth and connect to the underworld spirits. Thus, the tree is an access point to the upper and lower realms. The shaman nearly always enters into an ecstatic state near the axis mundi. The Buryat shaman makes his drum out of the wood of the sacred tree; thus, bringing the axis mundi to him and opening the gateway when the drum is played. This is a very common practice in which the Shaman brings the “center of the world” to him.

By the fact that the shell of his drum is derived from the actual wood of the Cosmic Tree, the shaman, through his drumming, is magically projects into the vicinity of the Tree; his is project to the “Center of the World.” and thus can ascend to the sky. (Eliade 169)

Perhaps another reason the tree is universal is because the tree is more than just the access point

to the heavens and the underworld. Symbolically, it reaches out to the heavens, but physically, it does reach up to the sky, which connects the people to everything up above. It also continues to reproduce, becoming a symbol of fertility as well. The tree as a symbol itself becomes very versatile, as pointed out by Eliade:

On one hand, it represents the universe in continual regeneration, the inexhaustible spring of cosmic life, the paramount reservoir of the sacred (because it is the "Center" for the reception of the celestial sacred, etc.); on the other, it symbolizes the sky or the planetary heavens. (Eliade 271)

A tree is one of the only things that reaches up to the sky and reaches down below deep into the earth. While plants do this, a tree does it on a much grander scale. A tree is also manageable and can be cultivated; thus, making the axis mundi mobile, to a certain degree. This versatility might be another reason for it being a universal symbol.

The tree has a universal role as a symbol of fertility which is very important to cultures around the world. A tree also dies yearly and is reborn yearly. It also bears fruit annually; thus, giving an illusion of immortality. Rain falls from the heavens and feeds the tree through its roots. Leaves grow and collect energy from the sky. Within the bark of the tree, energy is processed and the tree grows. This gives rise to "Tree of Life" symbol since it symbolizes a continuance of life, death, rebirth, and fertility. For the Mayans, *itz*, basically translated as "life energy," flows up and down the ceiba tree. This energy is transferred to the physical world and to the spiritual realms, both upper and lower. This is not all that different from the Semang Pygmies view of the Mapic Tree. Eliade alludes to "life energy" in his description of the tree:

This of course, is a miraculous tree and the source of life; for at its roots are the breasts heavy with milk, and there too are the spirits of infants—presumably the souls of the yet unborn. (Eliade 281)

Also for the Mayans, the tree represents the four cardinal directions as well as the four elements: earth, fire, wind, and water, and also takes a central role in the Popul Vuh, virtually the Mayan bible. The tree is connected to the earth; thus, the tree is part of the earth. However, the tree

also reaches up to the sky, representing wind or air. Because the tree absorbs water for life, it represents water. And like all other plants, a tree needs light to grow; thus, it represents light. Many shamanistic beliefs and older religious practices revolve around earth-centered concepts such as those mentioned above. A tree unites all of those elements into one symbol.

It is also interesting to mention that the tree is usually both a masculine and a feminine symbol. By bearing fruit, the tree takes on a feminine role. However, the elongated shape to the tree can be considered a phallic symbol; thus, it appeals to both masculinity and femininity.

The population of the Americas is not indigenous to the land. They are immigrants from Asia through the Bering Strait. It is likely that the beliefs of the Mayans have similar regards for the “World Tree” because they have a similar origin. Even though the peoples separated for more than 30,000 years, it is possible that the world-view of the “World Tree” was so important that it held on for all those years.

It has been demonstrated that a tree represents several basic elements of the world: the four directions, the four elements, life and fertility, masculine and feminine, and so on. The tree has universal appeal by reaching to the heavens and reaching far into the underground; thus, it becomes a symbol of connection between the upper and lower realms. It is easy to see how the tree as the axis mundi is a fundamental concept throughout Shamanistic traditions and Indo-European cultures. Even Jesus was nailed to two pieces of wood and set atop the grave of Adam; thus, making the cross into the world tree for the Christians. There is little need to mention the possible cultural connection of the Americas to northern Asia via the immigration through the Bering Strait. The fact of the matter is that the tree, as a symbol of life and the center of the earth, is a fundamental concept to nearly every culture.