

ON THE PRESENT-DAY VENERATION OF SACRED TREES IN THE HOLY LAND

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Abstract: This article surveys the current pervasiveness of the phenomenon of sacred trees in the Holy Land, with special reference to the official attitudes of local religious leaders and the attitudes of Muslims in comparison with the Druze as well as in monotheism vs. polytheism. Field data regarding the reasons for the sanctification of trees and the common beliefs and rituals related to them are described, comparing the form which the phenomenon takes among different ethnic groups. In addition, I discuss the temporal and spatial changes in the magnitude of tree worship in Northern Israel, its syncretic aspects, and its future.

Key words: Holy land, sacred tree, tree veneration

INTRODUCTION

Trees have always been regarded as the first temples of the gods, and sacred groves as their first place of worship and both were held in utmost reverence in the past (Pliny 1945: 12.2.3; Quantz 1898: 471; Porteous 1928: 190). Thus, it is not surprising that individual as well as groups of sacred trees have been a characteristic of almost every culture and religion that has existed in places where trees can grow (Philpot 1897: 4; Quantz 1898: 467; Chandran & Hughes 1997: 414). It is not uncommon to find traces of tree worship in the Middle East, as well. However, as William Robertson-Smith (1889: 187) noted, “there is no reason to think that any of the great Semitic cults developed out of tree worship”.

It has already been recognized that trees are not worshipped for themselves but for what is revealed through them, for what they imply and signify (Eliade 1958: 268; Zahan 1979: 28), and, especially, for various powers attributed to them (Millar *et al.* 1999: 35; Hamilton 2002: 57). In addition, they are sometimes seen to be the abode of supreme beings (see Dafni 2006 for a review). Sacred trees are thus treated as any other sacred space, and it is therefore not surprising that many of the customs and ceremonies observed in sacred places, in general, are also observed at the sites of sacred trees.

In the Muslim world and in the Middle East, sacred places are closely related to the worship of saints (Goldziher 1971: *passim*; Westermarck 1973, 1968: *passim*; Canaan 1927: *passim*; Arráf 1993: *passim*; Anabsi 2008: *passim*; Subtelny 1989: *passim*; Culmsee *et al.* 2005: 187–189), and in many instances sacred trees are connected with sacred graves/shrines and share common supernatural powers: to grant divine blessings, to cure, and to punish offenders of the saint to whom the tree is dedicated and who endows the tree with its miraculous powers (Canaan 1927: *passim*; Dafni 2002, 2006, 2007a).

Pamela R. Frese and S. J. M. Gray (1995: 32) note: “Sacred trees have a ritual significance. The trees and their meanings may be incorporated into rituals of curing, initiation, marriage and death. Trees used in any of these contexts stand for the divine and represent the sacred beliefs being honoured through the ritual.” In the same vein, Canaan (1927: 151) adds: “The present-day peasant does not venerate the trees themselves but the divine power which acts in them and which is derived from a godly person whose soul is supposed to be inhabiting the shrine, tomb, cave or spring with which they became associated. Often these holy men have appeared in the tree itself or near by.”

Regarding this point, it is pertinent to cite John Mills (1864: 54) who declared: “Yet in no country are the people more awed by trees than in Palestine.”

The current article, based on extensive fieldwork, surveys some aspects of the contemporary prevalence of tree worship in present day Israel, with special emphasis on the reasons for the sanctification of trees and the customs related to them. Also traced are the changes in the extent of the phenomenon over the past few generations and among the various religions.

METHODOLOGY

The field study, performed between 1999 and 2006, centred on thirty-five Arab, Bedouin, and Druze villages in the Galilee. Informants were asked, in an unstructured interview, about the reasons why certain trees became sacred, the existence of sacred trees (including historical and abandoned ones), who visit these trees and for what purposes, what the attitude of their religion is to tree worship, what supernatural powers are attributed to and what customs and ceremonies are observed near or under sacred trees.

The survey covered 158 informants, comprising 47 Druze and 111 Muslims (54 Arabs and 57 Bedouins). The distinction between Bedouins and Arabs was made in an attempt to expose any differences in traditions regarding sacred trees that may reflect differences between nomads and settled village people.

I took Arabs to be people settled in their villages for several centuries, and Bedouins to be people who originated in the deserts of Israel and Jordan, and migrated to Galilee during the last three centuries, and were nomads until the end of the 20th century (Medzini 1984: 30).

The Druze are an eastern Mediterranean religious group first established in Egypt in the 11th century (Dana 2003: 3). Today they are concentrated in Lebanon, Syria, and Israel (Dana 2003: 8–14). Their belief in the revelation of God in the form of a human being is the most important fundamental principle of the Druze faith (Besterman 1928: 145; Dana 2003: 15). This is not in essence a ritual and ceremonial belief system, but rather a Neo-Platonic philosophy (Dana 2003: 17).

The survey excluded Christians, who rarely believe in sacred trees, while tree worship among Jews is a new trend which appeared in the last two decades. Almost all the trees worshipped by Jews are revered already by Muslims and grow in the vicinity of graves of Jewish personalities regarded as righteous.

In each village I carried out a preliminary survey to locate, *a priori*, the more knowledgeable people. I also sought important religious leaders to enquire of their attitudes to the worship of sacred trees. I chose informants according to their knowledge of common/local traditions and/or religious status. The average age of the informants was 53.7 (+/- 13.6) years. Respondents comprised 126 males and 32 females (in general, women were reluctant to be interviewed and, when they agreed, the interview was held in the presence of other family members). Because of the refusal of most of the informants to be videotaped or to have their statements recorded, the study is based entirely on oral interviews and field notes taken on the spot. I also surveyed 78 known sacred trees of which 37 are active centres of worship today. (Numbers in bold in the text indicate how many informants gave a certain answer).

RESULTS

Table 1. The ethnic distribution of the sacred trees in Northern Israel

Ethnic/religious group	Active	Abandoned	Disappeared during the last decade	In cemeteries
Arabs	9	14	1	1
Bedouins	11	8	6	3
Druze	17	2	0	0
Jewish	6	0	0	2
Syncretic	4	0	0	0

Table 2. Reasons for the sanctification of trees as related to the ethnic/religious groups in Northern Israel

Reason	Druze N=38	Arab N=36	Bedouins N=23	Records from other countries
Syncretic reasons				
Religious/social meetings take place under the tree; well known figures are associated with the tree.	71	44.4	30.4	Ancient Assyria, Iran, Morocco, India
The tree is dedicated to a prophet.	47.3	22.2	34.7	
The tree/forest commemorates events in the lives of saints, heroes, kings, in the tribe's history etc.	36.8	41.6	26	Ancient Assyria, Ancient Britain, Ireland, England, Morocco, Mozambique, Uganda, Iran, India, Nepal, Okinawa, New Zealand
The tree is religiously blessed.	26.3	19.4	17.3	India, East Asia
The tree sprouted from a saint's staff.	7.8	11.1	4.3	England, Ireland, Poland, Morocco, Iran, India, New Zealand
Exclusive/differential reasons				
The tree is the abode of a <i>Welli</i> 'saint's spirit'.	0	58.3	52	Iraq, Turkey
A saint was buried near/under the tree.	2.6	52.7	21.7	
The tree shows the way to a sacred place.	92	0	0	
The tree provides shade in the desert.	0	0	17.3	

Modified from Amots Dafni (2006), which includes full citations; the numbers indicate the percentage of the informants that mentioned each reason.

Table 3. Customs related to sacred trees as related to the ethnic/religious groups in Northern Israel

Issue	Druze N=34	Arab N=45	Bedouins N=29	Records from other countries
Syncretic customs				
Rag tying.	73.5	84.4	68.9	Many countries worldwide
Animal sacrifice (when vows are fulfilled).	50	42.2	48.2	Lebanon, Syria, India
Leaving objects under/on the tree to absorb <i>Barakeh</i> 'divine blessing'.	38.2	71.1	37.9	
Personal vows, health/personal petitions.	58.8	71.1	62.0	Scotland, Estonia, Serbia, Russia, Middle East, East and Central Africa, India, Japan, Australia, New Zealand
Weddings under the tree.	17.1	28.8	51.7	India

Religious/social meetings under the tree.	23.5	26.6	31.0	Russia, Sierra Leone, Tanzania, India, Korea, Indonesia, American Indians
Pilgrimage/family gatherings.	11.0	23.0	13.8	
Lighting candles/lamps.	23.5	31.1	24.1	Lebanon, Turkey, Balkan, Russia, Uganda, Armenia, India
Hammering of nails.	8.8	8.9	17.2	Egypt, Turkey, Kurdistan, Austria, Russia, Ireland, India, West Himalaya
Placing stones on/under the tree or in heaps/cairns.	2.9	8.9	10.3	Russia, India, Korea
Burning incense (as a part of a personal form of praying).	5.9	24.4	17.2	Armenia, India
Leaving objects/ food under the tree as charity.	26.4	15.5	20.6	
Exclusive/differential customs				
Funeral/ burial/under the tree/in the sacred grove (of leaders and heroes).	0	20.0	24.1	Ancient Israelite, Mongolia, Zimbabwe, Kenya, Ghana, Mozambique, Tanzania, Okinawa,
Embracing/touching/kissing of the tree.	55.9	4.4	6.9	Ancient Rome
Rain making ceremonies.	0	15.5	27.5	Ancient Rome, North East and Central Africa, Arabia, India, Papua
Passing judgment under the tree.	0	4.4	27.5	Ancient Israelites, Morocco, France, Germany, Switzerland, Somalia, India, Japan
<i>Sulkha</i> 'conciliation of quarrels' under the tree.	0	0	20.6	
Decoration of tree (with leader's pictures, lights).	14.7	0	0	
Leaving water under the tree.	0	8.9	13.8	
Praying while passing near the tree.	0	7.7	6.9	

Modified from Dafni (2006), which includes full citations; the numbers indicate the percentage of the informants that mentioned each custom.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Holy and sacred vs. blessed trees

In order to clarify the “sacred” status of trees, it is necessary to elucidate the conceptual differences between “blessed”, “sacred”, and “holy”. The difference is not only semantic, but reflects religious attitudes concerning the adoration of trees. According to Druze tradition, only people such as prophets can be “sacred”, while only physical objects such as trees can be regarded as “blessed”

(Dafni *et al.* 2005). Frederick J. Simoons (1998: 293) distinguishes “holy trees”, such as the sacred fig or Bo-tree (*Ficus religiosa* L.), where all the members of certain species are venerated, from individual “sacred trees” which are locally adored because of special characteristics, or which have been given respect due to their location in a holy place or because of their association with a holy person. In many cultures it is traditional that all specimens of a given botanical species are equally venerated. The only tree in the Middle East that could possibly be regarded as a “Holy tree” is Christ’s Thorn Jujube (*Ziziphus spina christi*), which is mentioned in the Quran. All the trees of this species are highly respected, but are worshipped only in connection with a righteous person and not in and of themselves.

An old Muslim legend recounts that Christ’s Thorn Jujube, which also grows in Paradise, has as many leaves as there are human beings. Each leaf bears the name of a particular person, as well as the names of that person’s parents. Every year, on one day in the middle of the month of Ramadan, just after sunset, the tree is shaken. The names on the leaves that fall are of those who will face death in the coming year. The processes of leaf decay indicate the timing of their death; some leaves dry up and fall immediately while others wither slowly, indicating the amount of time remaining to that person (Rodwell 1937: 69; Zwemer 1920: 69). This legend reflects the respect which Muslims accord to all of Christ’s Thorn Jujube trees, wherever they are. The special attitude to the Christ’s Thorn Jujube can be summarized and explained as the traditional belief that the tree should be esteemed and respected, since it was probably the home of certain saints or other spirits (Crowfoot & Baldensperger 1932: 112).

Except for the case of *Z. spina christi*, all the other sacred trees in the Middle East are venerated for their connections with saints, prophets and other righteous figures, and not according to their taxonomic position/or mythical properties (Dafni 2006).

The present-day prevalence of sacred trees in the Holy Land.

Tewfik Canaan (1927) and S. Arráf (1993) mentioned the wide prevalence of sacred trees in the Holy Land. The former talked about 128 solitary sacred trees, while the latter surveyed 109 sites (69 of which contain one single tree and 12 include groves or forests). Armoni and Shmida (1987) surveyed about 1200 “old and veteran trees” at 100 sites in Samaria, while Lissovsky (2004) has noted 62 sacred locations containing trees in the northern part of Israel. Regarding the present survey in the northern part of Israel, I found 78 trees for which there is oral and/or written evidence concerning their “religious

history” (Table 1). Only 33 solitary trees and four groves still serve today as centres of some kind of worship (especially the tying of votive rags).

When considering the importance of surveys of old trees and those growing in sacred places, it is important to note that not all old trees or all of those which grow in sacred places are inevitably “sacred” (defined as “targets of special worship”, see Dafni 2006 and references therein). In some locations there are old trees (n=12), but we have no evidence that they were the subject of any kind of worship (e.g., the largest olive trees in the Galilee, which are near the old village spring of Deir Hanna, are not worshipped at all). The need to clarify what is meant by “old” and “sacred” trees (based on written or oral evidence or field observations) complicates any attempt to compare the results of different surveys. If many trees are growing in the vicinity of a sacred place, it is impossible to consider all of them as “sacred” merely because of their specific location. When the evidence is related to a certain solitary tree (most of the sacred trees are of this type), there are usually few contradictions among the sources, but a survey of trees in “sacred places” and/or “old trees” may yield a different picture. This is especially important in studies related to botanical and ecological aspects, such as species composition and preferred habitats.

The cases of “sacred groves” in which all the trees are equally venerated prove to be extremely rare. The present survey recorded nine examples, but only three are still visited by believers today. Even in these three cases, they are visited less frequently than in the past.

In the Christian sector, tree veneration is quite rare, and individuals seldom visit sacred trees. If they do, they generally do so far away from the public eye and alone, without any public or family being present at the event.

Landscape ecology and conservational aspects

Nurit Lissovsky’s (2004) and Achva Benzinberg Stein’s (1987) extensive characterization of sacred trees in northern Israel as visual elements of the anthropogenic landscape led them to suggest how to preserve them from a cultural viewpoint.

All over the world sacred groves are considered as “time capsules” which may preserve the “pristine” biodiversity before human over-exploitation. There is intensive current research activity to document this biological as well as cultural diversity to provide a basis devising preservation policies, especially in India (Deb & Malhotra 2001), Africa (Himberg 2004; Falconer 1999; Anoliefo *et al.* 2003; O’Neal Campbell 2005) and East Asia (Bharucha 1999; Malhotra *et al.* 2001; Sreedharan 2004).

The few remaining “sacred groves” in Israel are too small to represent any distinctive protected entities in comparison with surrounding vegetation. Because of trampling, species diversity is the same as or maybe even less than in highly visited sacred groves. A. Shmida (1980) has already shown that giant sacred trees are merely a result of human protection and not any climax relics of the “old vegetation” prior to human intervention.

Sacred trees are disappearing today especially due to agriculture as well as intensive road construction, particularly if they are not situated within the villages or on private property. The deeply held and widespread belief that any harm done to a sacred tree will immediately result in divine punishment confers some protection (Canaan 1927; Arráf 1993, Dafni 2007a and references therein).

In summary, despite their beauty and charm, mighty sacred trees do not have any pure conservation value except for the aesthetic and cultural value accorded to them

Nir Beker and Shirra Freeman (2009) studied the economic value of old trees in Israel, suggesting an economic model to assess the “annual value of old growth trees”. Because most of the sacred trees fall into this category, policy makers can take into consideration their importance in local heritage as a means of promoting their conservation.

Conflict with religious leaders

When I asked religious people about various aspects of tree worship, I received the following range of answers:

1. “We respect the Sheikh (to whom the tree is dedicated) and not the tree.” (Bassam Hajaj, 70, Muslim, Rami, 15 June 2005)

2. “We have to believe in God, not in a tree as this is against religious law.” (Qasim Bader, 45, keeper of the Druze sacred place of Nabi Sabalan, 9 June 2002)

3. “A man that prays to a tree is a heathen; we need to pray only to God. The tree is temporary; only God is eternal; we have to pray to God, who is the creator. We have to worship God, not trees.” (Zaki Abu Bilal Hashad, 67, Muslim Imam, Tarshiha, 19 December 2002)

4. “A man does not need an indirect connection with God such as a sacred tree, *Welli* (‘a saint’) or any other person. It is impossible for a tree to be sacred; there is no such thing in Islam.” (Sheikh Abu Tawafiq, 71, Muslim Imam, Ein Mahel, 7 November 2004)

5. “Sanctity rests only in prophets; it is forbidden to sanctify objects such as stones and trees.” (Khamed Abu Mustafa, 47, Muslim, Arrabe, 21 December 2003)

6. "People have been praying to trees since the Roman times and this remains inside the man, I believe only in one God." (Ruqqiya Maghis, 50, Bedouin, Jordeikh, 27 March 2005)

7. "In our religion (Druze) we don't sanctify people or trees, only God; we love the prophets but we don't sanctify them." Saleh Hatib, 53, Druze, Mgh'ar, 26 August 2004)

8. "A blessed tree is a symbol of the prophet not an object *per se*." (Akab Amashe, 45, Druze Sheikh, Buq'ata, 12 December 2001)

9. "The man (a religious figure) is sacred and the tree is blessed. The tree belongs to the people and the saints are the prophets of God. The blessed trees are monuments to special figures in the history of the Druze religion. In our religion there are no gravestones or offerings in graveyards; the trees commemorate the deeds of these special personalities." (Sheikh Shahin Hussein, 70, Druze religious leader, Beit Jan, 12 September 2000)

The following story illustrates the negative attitude of religious leaders to tree worship:

One day, a "good man" was very upset to see that people were praying to a sacred tree instead of to God, and he decided to cut it down. When he was ready with an axe in his hand, an "evil man" appeared and demanded that he not harm the tree. They had a quarrel and the "good man" won and he was determined to cut it down. Then the "evil man" convinced him not to touch the tree and promised him that every morning from then on he would find a golden coin under his pillow. For several days it was thus, but one morning there was nothing under the pillow. The "good man" was very angry about the breaking of the agreement and approached the "evil man". They quarrelled again and, on this occasion, the latter prevailed. Then the "good man" asked the "evil man": "Why is it that I prevailed the first time, and that you prevailed on the second occasion?" The answer he received was this: "The first time you came to me, it was in the name of God, but the second time was for the sake of money."

(I have heard this story, with some variations, e.g., the "evil man" was Satan himself, from several sources (n= 8) among both Druze and Muslims).

Religious leaders, from all the surveyed ethnic groups, are unequivocally against any manifestation of tree worship. Despite their attitude, the practice is still quite popular, albeit less so today than in previous centuries. In the present study 100 % of our informants were aware of the existence of sacred trees and

no fewer than 17 % of the Druze and 7 % of the Muslims have visited a sacred tree at least once.

In some places, such as in the villages Sakh'nin, Arra'be and Mesh'hed, religious leaders tried in the 1960s to forbid visits to sacred trees, but the ban succeeded for only for a short time because of strong faith in the miraculous powers of the saints linked to the trees.

For many of the previous centuries the villages were quite isolated and without official religious leaders (*Imams*) and without mosques. The centres of religious life were *Makams*, 'the shrines of saints' (Frazer 1923: *passim*; Canaan 1927: *passim*; Arráf 1993: *passim*; Benzinberg Stein 1978: 123). The "holiness" spread also into the trees which became sacred, especially near the graves of saints, even without a *Makam* (Canaan 1927; Arráf 1993; Dafni 2006). In the absence of *Makams*, sacred trees replaced their religious and ceremonial function. I suspect that the decline of tree worship among Muslims in the Holy Land is related to the decrease in the popular worship of saints' shrines. From the beginning of the 20th century, official leaders established and maintained Islamic religious life even in remote villages, and oversaw the erection of mosques. As a result, the veneration of sacred trees gradually declined. Most informants recorded that their parents or grandparents had visited sacred trees regularly but it is "uncommon today". When I asked directly why the sacred trees are no longer visited 11 informants mentioned that "it is forbidden", but they gave no further explanations. However, among Druze communities, there is no similar tendency, and visits to sacred trees are still quite common.

Sacred trees and syncretism

All religions venerated the "Oak of Mamre", which has served as an important pilgrimage destination for religious Jews, Christians and Muslims throughout history (Frazer 1923: *passim*; see also Hepper & Gibson's 1994 review). Almost all accounts of pilgrimages or visits to the Holy Land since the fourth century of the last millennium mention this tree. Lewis Bayles Paton (1920: 58) gives another example: "At Banyas, near the source of the Jordan, there is an ancient holy oak sacred to Sheikh Ibrahim. This is visited by members of all the sects", and these words still hold true today. In Southern Lebanon, at Nebi Khiskin, there is a Druze *Khilwe* (a prayer house), which contains a sacred large oak (*Quercus calliprinos*). The grave of a Muslim Sheikh is attached to the *Khilwe* and he was buried there because the Druze highly appreciated his contribution to the upkeep of the place, especially his care of the sacred tree. Shiite Muslims, who live in the area, also venerate the tree. Victoria de Bun-

sen (1910: 241) wrote about the famous sacred *Pistacia atlantica* tree in Tel El Qadi (a gigantic tree, which was destroyed by fire in the late 1970s) which was a centre of pilgrimage for Christians, Jews, and Arabs. Syncretism as related to sacred trees is well known in many other countries (Frazer 1923: *passim*; Fowden 2002; Roy Burman 1998), and thus, is not a local phenomenon, as is clear from Tables 2 & 3. One of the most famous regional cases of syncretism is that of the Biblical *Ashera* and tree worship in the ancient Semitic race (Curtiss 1902: *passim*; Frazer 1923: *passim*; James 1966: *passim*; Day 1986: 392).

Today (Table 1), some sacred trees are visited mainly by local people of one specific ethnic group, while other trees (n=7) are famous for their omnipotent, miraculous powers, and are visited by Muslims, Druze and, more rarely, by Christians and Jews.

The reputations of some sacred trees attract frequent visits by people from other villages, while others remain almost anonymous. In the centre of the village of Mgh'ar (which has a mixed Druze-Muslim-Christian population), there is a huge *Ziziphus spina-christi* tree which is dedicated to a Muslim saint (Sheikh Rabbis). The tree receives equal veneration from Druze, Muslims and Christians. By contrast, an equally large tree of the same species, in the village of Maz'ra'a, dedicated to Sheikh Radwan, is visited mainly by Muslims. Perhaps this discrepancy is due to the magnitude of the importance attributed to the related saints. Canaan (1927: *passim*) notes that some saints are more powerful in their miraculous abilities than others.

The tomb of Sheikh Abdalla is located in the middle of an olive grove near the village of Abu Snan, with the trees around the tomb regarded as sacred. The saint is a legendary Druze figure, but the place is visited by Muslims, Druze, and Christians. However, until about fifty years ago this place was considered to be a Muslim grave, and was then visited only by Muslims.

The present survey (Table 1) revealed eight trees (including abandoned ones) that are syncretic, 21 trees regarded as sacred only by the Druze (80 % being close to very active religious structures in the middle of the villages), and 53 % trees sacred to Muslims, 15 % of which are at saints' *Makams* or graves).

Most of the reasons for the sanctification of trees and their associated beliefs and rituals are common to the ancient world as a whole and are not limited to the Middle East (Tables 2 & 3; Dafni 2002, 2006, 2007a). These generalizations apply equally to the monotheistic religions and many of the current polytheistic religions as well, mainly in Asia and Africa. The findings provide solid evidence for syncretism and may serve as evidence for the historical "leaking" of habits and customs from old forms of paganism into modern religions.

Current customs related to sacred trees

A comparison of the customs and manners related to sacred trees in present-day Israel (Dafni 2002, 2007a; Table 3) shows the following tendencies:

1. Sacred trees are just another kind of sacred place, with all of their meta-physical as well as physical manifestations. In the Middle East sacred trees are frequently associated by Muslims with the shrines and graves of saints, but this is very rare among the Druze. The Druze adherents believe in the transmigration of souls: a person's body is a kind of clothing for the soul, and with death the soul passes to the body of a newborn child (Dana 2003: 60). The Druze followers never consider sacred trees as an abode for the souls of righteous figures, and certainly do not associate them with graves (Dafni 2006).

2. In Islam there are no ceremonies or customs specific only to sacred trees, they are only performed in relation to other sacred places such as a mosque or saint's grave.

3. The following customs were found among Muslims as well as the Druze: animal sacrifice under a tree as part of the fulfilment of a personal vow; leaving money; attaching votive rags, making personal vows, placing of objects to absorb a divine blessing (*Barake*), hammering nails, placing stones under the tree, burning incense, lighting candles and weddings.

4. A few customs (e.g., the settling of quarrels, known as *Sulkha*), leaving objects to absorb divine blessings, and leaving objects for charity, seem to be characteristic of the Middle East, and were not recorded in other regions.

5. In modern times, sacred trees were never recorded in the Middle East as centres for official religious ceremonies, including sacrifices (to appease God), nor as places for the performing of rites of passage.

6. There are some variations among different ethnic groups: the Druze practice of kissing and decorating trees with pictures of religious leaders is largely restricted to them, while burying the dead under trees, leaving water and conducting rain-making ceremonies were not recorded from this group. Bedouin communities traditionally pass judgments under trees and commonly use them as public social centres.

The Druze very rarely conduct weddings near sacred trees, but this practice is common among Muslims, especially the Bedouins.

7. Since the 1950s and 1960s, ceremonies, such as rainmaking, weddings, *Sulkha*, and passing judgement under sacred trees are now almost extinct. Nevertheless, they figure vividly in the memories of older people.

8. Sacred trees in cemeteries are objects of great fear and are associated with worship, but ceremonies are not performed under them and tying of votive rags is very rare. These trees are still considered to have miraculous powers, especially when harmed or dishonoured.

9. When a sacred tree is adjacent to the tomb of a saint or to another religious structure, the main object of worship is the sacred place, and the tree is of a secondary importance.

In one case (Sheikh Saris near Majdal Kurum), there is a “sacred cabinet” (a domestic plastic cupboard) under the tree, which contains prayer books, money, rosary beads, candles, matches, incense and oil. In the last decade it has been replaced at least twice, because of fires caused by candles lit by worshippers. Activity under this specific tree is currently very frequent: offerings and rags placed on the tree change frequently, and remnants of family feasts are often left there. Several years ago, the tree canopy was closed into a type of a dome that created a place of deep shade, reminiscent of Pliny, who wrote that trees were the first temples of nature *l.c.*). Today (2010) the tree canopy is disrupted and cannot provide the seclusion and privacy that existed only four years ago.

This is the only case of which the author is aware when a sacred tree became a semi-official place of worship. There are no signs of a saint’s grave near the tree and the tree is not especially large or impressive; thus it is not at all clear why it became so important and why it remains so even today. The local people (n=12) who visited the tree were unable to offer us any explanation as to why they visit this specific place, and only said that it is a “sacred tree”.

The future of the sacred trees

Canaan (1927) and Arráf (1993) refer to many sacred trees that are unknown today. Some of these trees were neglected and disappeared because of destruction of villages in the 1948 war and as a result of extensive land development that took place later. In the present survey I documented at least 20 individual trees that have disappeared over the past fifty years.

It is difficult to pinpoint the reasons why sacred trees were neglected. Some abandoned trees still exist physically. I recorded 12 such trees which are visited very rarely; only elderly people know that these trees ever were sacred. Several such trees are in the vicinity of villages but have been disregarded by local people, especially during the last fifty years. There seems to be a general lessening of popular beliefs, including the practical worship of trees, although it is still deeply embedded in the public memory.

Some trees were more fortunate, and are carefully preserved by local authorities or by some families whose yards contain them. Most of these trees (n=8) are in Druze areas, and seven of them are presently within the boundaries of villages.

Muslim vs. Druze tree worship

A comparison of the reasons, regarding sanctity attributed to trees (Table 2), reveals differences between Druze and Muslims (Arabs as well as Bedouins), reflecting the Druze belief in the transmigration of souls, mentioned above. The Druze never regard sacred trees as abodes of the souls of righteous figures and certainly do not relate them to graves (Dafni 2006). Transmigration of the soul is also the reason why graves are not regarded as important by the Druze. Thus, the two commonest reasons for the sanctification of trees found among Muslims (trees as a saint's abode and their vicinity to graves) are alien to Druze tradition. The Druze focus on the deeds and events in the life of their prophets and religious leaders. In practice, the most common manifestations of tree worship (Table 3) such as votive rag tying, vows, personal petitions and praying, are almost as frequent among the Druze and the Muslims, tree worship is clearly more popular among the Druze than Muslims (Dafni 2002; Dafni *et al.* 2005). It was therefore unexpected to find that even the Druze relate supernatural powers to sacred trees; their fear of and admiration for sacred trees is equal to that of the Muslims (Table 3; Dafni 2002, 2006, 2007a, 2007b). While the Muslims ascribe miraculous powers (e.g., the trees' immunity to fire) to *Wellis'* souls or God, the Druze ascribe them to the prophet or religious leaders (Dafni 2006). In this specific point the Druze religion is closer to the Jewish faith than that of the Muslims.

According to the Druze religion, there are two "classes" of people, religious ones and non-believers, and there is no intermediate phase (Dana 2003). Religious people are very orthodox and strictly avoid any manifestation of tree worship; their centre for praying is an official place (*Khilwe*). Non-believers among the Druze have only vague ideas about the secrets of their religion and are not allowed to enter the *Khilwe*; actually, they have nowhere to practice their religion. It seems that the higher prevalence of "active" sacred trees in Druze areas compared with that of Muslims (Table 1) arises from the needs of the secular Druze for a place for fulfilment of their personal spiritual needs. Most of the Druze sacred trees are dedicated to their prophets (Dafni 2006) and thus may freely replace the religious function of the *Khilwe* without the intervention of religious authority.

Sacred trees among the Jews

The Israeli Ministry of Religious Affairs has adopted many traditional sacred grave sites of local saints since the foundation of the State of Israel (1948). These were officially declared to be tombs of historical Jewish righteous peo-

ple, some of which include very famous sacred trees. New tombs were erected in such places, replacing old ones. Some of these sites (n=4) became places of devotion for Jewish believers and this type of pilgrimage is now popular, but the tomb is the focus of devotion rather than the tree. These trees, formerly very famous and popular among local people, are less visited by Muslims and the Druze today, if at all. Some of the other sacred trees are syncretic and visited, infrequently, also by Jews. Other trees in the vicinity of graves of Jewish righteous figures or Jewish cemeteries are visited and used also as “wishing trees” and are never treated as sacred objects, and all prayers and votive offerings are directed only to the specific religious figure.

At Kadita, Upper Galilee, there is a large tree near the gravestone of Rabbi Tarfon. A cabinet constructed in 2006 stands under the tree and contains prayer books and a permanently lit glass oil lamp. Muslims used to venerate this site but now ignore it after the grave became popular with Jewish believers. A *Ziziphus spina christi* tree at the old Jewish cemetery of Tiberias is close to the graves of four famous rabbis. Visitors used to pick fruits from the tree as talismans for long life, and according to the evidence of the local keeper of the place: “My family is eight generations in Tiberias and it is a tradition that passed from generation to generation that we are not allowed to touch or to cut this tree. The Jews pick fruits as a health talisman.” (Akhikam Moshe David 4.5.2009, www.nrg.co.il)

The tree near the Tomb of Rabbi Uziel Ben Yonatan (in Amuka, Upper Galilee) is covered with rags and written personal requests. This rabbi is revered as a match-maker, and the site has recently become a centre of mass pilgrimage by single girls specifically for this purpose. After praying at the tomb, many used to visit the tree and leave a reminder to the righteous person although it was forbidden by the local religious authorities.

In the old cemetery of Safed people used to leave rags and other objects on trees near sacred graves. Additionally, they walked around a specific grave seven times while chanting a prayer for health and a good life, and then put rags or notes on the tree. One of the duties of the local keeper is to remove rags from the trees. According to the words of the local researcher and guard of the place: “It is not a Jewish manner... people from North Africa have copied Islamic traditions.” (Elyahu Ben Tovim 12.10.09) I was unable to find any Jewish sacred trees which are not attached to a sacred grave or Jewish cemetery. Interestingly, sacred trees in Muslim cemeteries are highly respected but rarely serve as targets for a personal petition.

Monotheistic vs. polytheistic sacred trees

Today in the Middle East, as well as in Europe, individuals submit personal petitions as part of tree worship. However, the sanctification of trees is not part of any major monotheistic religion (Dafni 2006). In Muslim, Druze and Christian traditions, sacred trees are dedicated to saints and prophets who guard their trees and punish anyone who tries to harm them, targeting the offender and/or his family and property and not the whole community. These religions have no official codes of punishment to protect sacred trees or groves from deliberate violation (Dafni 2007a).

Most polytheistic religions prevail in regions dominated by tropical or semi-tropical vegetation. Here, the sacred wood/grove/forest is the focus of worship and a centre of well established religious ceremonies, sometimes led by official figures.

Until recently, the wood/forest/grove was regarded as essential to protect the culture's very existence, as, for example, sources of medicinal plants and watersheds. Systems of punishment were established to protect the woodland resources from over-exploitation. Society regards any wilful harm to trees as direct sacrilege against the supernatural power who is the benefactor of the community and may punish the whole community in revenge. This might take the form of frequent suffering which could include calamities such as fire, flood, or disease. Thus, there is a need to pacify the supernatural powers, who guard the community and to whom the trees are dedicated. This putative pattern has been recorded fully or partly in Vietnam (Wode 2002: 113), Kenya (Himberg 2004: 89), Mozambique (Serra 2001: 14), Laos (Chanthitath 2000: 324), China (Laird 1991: 352; Huabin 2003: 131–132), India (Amirthalingam 2000: 8; Rodgers 1994: 345; Khiewtam & Ramkrishnan 1989: 66–68; Apffel-Marglin & Mishra 1993: 201; Patnaik & Pandey 1998: 315–319; Bharucha 1991: 384; Dudley 1999: 96), East Africa (Hobley 1967: 414, 432), Cote D'Ivoire (Zoundjikepon & Dossou-Glehouenou 1991: 370), Nigeria (Anoliefo *et al.* 2003: 290, 292–293), Ghana (Falconer 1991: 366; O'Neal-Campbell 2005: 159), Timor (McWilliam 2001: 90–99), Senegal, Vietnam (Boven & Morohashi 2002: 113).

Comparison of the reasons why trees/groves become sacred shows some dichotomy between the monotheistic legacy of the sacred trees in Europe, Middle East and North Africa in comparison with the polytheistic traditions elsewhere (Dafni 2006).

In polytheistic religions, especially in Africa and Asia, people still see the sacred tree/grove as the abode of deities or their ancestors' spirits (Table 1), which may reflect the old pagan habits that prevailed in the distant past in Europe, the Middle East as well as North Africa.

In the polytheistic world the sacred tree is a centre of communal tribal activities and sometimes access is limited to only certain people and/or on certain occasions, the grove being maintained by the community or by a special priest. Furthermore, there is a general taboo against harming the tree in Sierra Leone (Lebbie & Freudenberger 1996: 311), Okinawa (Sered 1999: 518), East Timor (Meitzner-Yoder 2005: 224), India (Sreedharan 2004: 49; Malhotra *et al.* 2001: 9), Russia (Vovina 2000: 699), Zimbabwe (Chidhakwa 2001: 6), Northern Ghana (Millar *et al.* 1999: 35), Vanuatu (Thaman 1992: 9), Mozambique (Virtanen 2002: 229), West Africa (McKenzie 1997: 45). In the Middle East, the sacred tree is regarded today as a centre for individual ritual behaviour with free access for anybody (Canaan 1927; Dafni 2007b).

Tree worship in the Muslim world

Several authors consider tree worship in the Muslim world as a relic of old pagan ideas of tree-spirits or gods, which survived, in a barely disguised form, throughout the ages of Christian and Islamic supremacy (Thompson 1883: 242; Robertson-Smith 1889: 199; Frazer 1923: 50). The tree spirits/deities/gods of the early pagan inhabitants were replaced after the Arab conquest by the spirits of the Muslim saints, the *Awliya*, who may live and appear in the sacred tree, e.g., in Palestine (Canaan 1927: 151), Iran (Ouseley 1819: 378) and Morocco (Westermarck 1973: 97). A completely different view is expressed by William F. Albright (1940: 284–286) who considers the *Welli* cult of Palestine and Syria as merely a phase in the cult of the saints of the Mediterranean region and to differ only in the finer details from the cult of the lower classes in other Mediterranean lands. Moreover, Albright argues that this saint-cult goes back to the Christian saint-cult of the Eastern Roman Empire in early Byzantine centuries and is Hellenistic-Roman, not Semitic in origin. Along the same lines, G. D. Hornblower (1930: 19) noted, concerning the sacred trees in Egypt, that the local gods were replaced by local saints, first Christian and then Muslim.

With the further evolution of Islam, these old venerated trees were cut down and this kind of worship was strictly forbidden (Goldziher 1971: 318). The practical result, which, can be seen today, could be considered as a kind of functional religious replacement: the trees were no longer regarded as abodes of tree-spirits, deities or gods as they had been in earlier heathen times, but as the abodes of saints, regarded as the messengers of God himself. This kind of “soft idolatry” is in existence even today, despite formal Islamic directives, which are not strong enough to eliminate it, especially in rural areas.

In summary, as a result of the present study, tree worship is still alive in present-day Israel, although there has been a considerable decline over the last few decades. I fully agree with James G. Frazer (1923: 43), who wittily summarized the status of the sacred trees in the Middle East as follows: “Thus the worship at the high places and green trees, which pious Hebrew kings forbade and prophets thundered against thousands of years ago, persists apparently in the same places to this day.”

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Tree veneration is especially popular in the Druze villages as well as in rural Muslim areas. It is less common among the Bedouins and rare in the mostly urban Christian-Arab societies, but has shown recent growth among the Jews.

While the Muslims connect sacred trees with the souls of saints and their graves, the Druze, who believe in transmigration of souls, relate blessed trees mainly to events and activities in the lives of prophets and historical religious leaders. Most of the customs, attitudes and manners related to sacred trees and reasons for sanctification are syncretic but some are restricted to the Druze.

Because of the pace of modern life, and land development, we are witnessing the erosion of traditions and sacred trees and their veneration are now in a steady decline. Most are now solitary and not in old groves; they have an importance as objects of cultural heritage rather than any iconic value for the conservation of pristine habitats and survive thanks to religious sanctions against their destruction.

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