

Why are rags tied to the sacred trees of the holy land?

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Abstract. A field survey of the customs of venerating sacred trees in the northern part of Israel was carried out in 2000-2001. It included 60 interviewees: 24 Druze, 18 Moslems, 12 Moslem Bedouins and 6 Christian Arab individuals. Tree veneration was widespread especially among Druze and rural Moslems. We surveyed several aspects of tree worship, such as the reasons and the historical background why specific trees became sacred along the generations; what are the characteristics of the sacred trees (physically as well as abstract); the origins of the tree's names; the practice of worship, traditions and manners. It was realized that even today sacred trees are popular centers of "rural" family ceremonies and as pilgrimage targets. This type

of worship is strongly surviving in Israel among people of various religions: Druze, Arabs, Christian and Jews. The manners in which they worship the trees are partly overlapped with some differentiation. In all religions the leaders are against tree worship and veneration is ruled out as a revelation of heathen work and/or animism. The living tradition, especially on the individual level, is stronger than the official restrictions of monotheism. The sacred trees are used as private praying places especially for individual's vows and request in times of personal discomfort. A list of 15 reasons for tying rag on sacred tree has been collected in the present report. Tree veneration is additional to the religious practice and is not a substitute for it.

Key words: Rag tying, Sacred tree, Tree veneration

INTRODUCTION

It seems that the custom to tie rags on sacred trees exists in almost every known human culture beyond the borders of religions, geography and time (DE GUBERNATIS 1878; PATAI 1942; FRAZER 1990).

It is noteworthy that the tying of rags is only one common manifestation of tree worship. FRESE & GRAY (1995) have already stated "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 honored through the ritual".

FABRIDGE (1970) discusses the reasons why people tie rags to sacred trees and asks, "How was a man to show his reverence for such sacred trees? Obviously by removing some of his clothing and valuables and placing them upon the tree, thereby symbolizing his readiness to sacrifice his all to the deity, which it represented. It thus became customary in Palestine in ancient times, as it is still nowadays, to hang various objects upon trees as

marks of reverence." A somewhat complementary explanation for rag hanging on trees was suggested by RIX (1907) who explains that. "The root idea of the custom (of rag tying) seems to be the identification, or at any rate the close connection, of the clothes with the wearer, so that in offering his clothes it is as if a man offered a part of himself".

According to CANAAN (1927) "The Bedouin and Half Bedouin often fasten their 'uqal' (the woven rope that tightens the head cover the 'kafiyah') on the holy tree. They believe that this is most efficacious, since it is a complete article (and or just a piece of cloth) of dress and represent the owner better".

The earliest written evidence concerning rag hanging on trees is related to Arnobius (3rd century AD) who complained about the Libyans' pagan manner of putting ribbons on trees (MCCRACKEN 1949). Two ancient artifacts depict rags on trees. A gnarled and ancient plane tree (*Platanus orientalis*) decorated with festive bands overspreads an altar depicted on a second century votive stone from Greece (ca 150 BC) now in the Glyptothek in Munich (BAUMAN 1993; BERNARD

1977). Trees are also well represented on a Roman silver plate, and the central scene on the Stráze lanx depicts an oath-taking ceremony beneath a tree with a ceremonial cloth draped over one of its branches (HENIG 1983) (John MacMahon, pers. comm.)

Rag tying is largely distributed in the Moslem world (GOLDZIEHER 1971). RIX (1907) noted that clothes that are left on sacred trees are not just gifts in the ordinary sense; rather, they are channels connecting the worshipper with the object or person worshipped.

In the Moslem world, rags, used clothes, yarn and threads are tied, in the shrines or tombs of holy figures (Wellys) and on objects around them such as sacred trees, wire netting which covers the windows of saint's tombs, fences, etc (LEYARD 1854; CURTISS 1902; WESTERMARCK 1968; CANAAN 1927) in order to get the saint's divine blessing. RIX (1907) mentioned, "Holiness is, indeed, to the Palestine peasant a sort of liquid which may be absorbed by physical contact. The man who hangs a rag upon a tree will take from it and wear about his person another rag which has become soaked with the virtue of the place by hanging there..."

Rag tying on sacred trees is quite common in the Middle East and surrounding areas (MERRIL 1883; DROWER 1941; see also Table 1) as well as in Cyprus (DIAMANDOPOULOS & MARKETOS 1993; GRINSELL 1990) Turkey (YASSIN *et al.*, 1999) and Morocco (WESTERMARK 1968).

The present field study surveys the reasons why people tie rags to sacred trees as a ceremonial part of tree worship, which is actively practiced today in rural areas of Israel, especially by the Druse and Moslem Arabs.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Fifty interviewees were questioned in the northern part of Israel during 2000-01. The group included 24 Druse, 18 Moslems Arabs, 12 Bedouins (who are also Moslems), and 6 Christian Arab individuals. The sample is biased towards the Druse and the Moslem Arabs because tree veneration is common in these ethnic groups while it is uncommon among the Bedouins (in the

Northern part of Israel in which the survey was carried out) and rare among the Christian Arabs. The people were chosen according to their knowledge of common traditions and/or due to their high religious status. The average age of the informants was 55 years (+/- 12 years). The sample included 45 males and 5 females (the women were interviewed in the presence of family members). The basic question was "Why are rags hung on trees?" Complementary inquiry on specific items was introduced only after the informant had already expressed his/her view. The numbers in parenthesis {} indicate how many of our interviewees mentioned a specific item. Original phrases are cited personally with additional data on the interviewee.

The Druse belong to a monotheistic religion, which originated in the 11th century in Egypt. This religion is secret and is known only to the narrow pious layer. Today they dwell mainly in Syria, Lebanon and Israel (DANA 1998). The Druse are very closed cast, they keep strictly to their religious isolation as well as old traditions and folklore. The Bedouins, who were included in the present survey, have lived in the Lower Galilee for several generations (150-200 years). They abandoned their nomad lifestyle especially during the 20th century.

In some cases leading interviewees were questioned again for further clarifications of items that were not found in the literature. We were cautious to insure that each informant questioned on these specific issues would be from a different village or at least from a different family to keep independence of the information sources. In such cases we asked indirect questions to avoid, as much as possible, biased answers. All the notes were taken during the interviews, as a result of direct translation (if needed). This procedure enabled us to make all the clarifications and cross inquiries on the spot as needed. Many of the interviewees asked us to refrain from recording or videotaping the sessions.

RESULTS

The results of the field survey are presented in Table 1.

Table 1 - The distribution of reasons why people tie rags on sacred trees according to the ethnic origin of the interviewees and parallel references.

Reason	Druze	Moslem Arabs	Bedouins	Christian Arabs	Middle East reference	World reference
1. Votive offering	20	15	8	5	Oesterley 1923, Fabridge 1970 (Pagan ancient Arabia); SESSION 1889 (Lebanon); JAUSSEN 1908 (Trans-Jordan); DOUGHTY 1926 (Syria to Morocco); DONALDSON 1973 (Iran); WESTERMARCK 1968 (Morocco); GRINSELL 1990, DIAMANDOPOULOS & MARKETOS 1993 (Cyprus); YASSIN <i>et al.</i> 1999 (Turkey).	Pliny, Tacit, Ovid (Old Rome); ANONYMOUS (n.d.), OVSYANNIKOV & TEREBIKHIN 1994 (Nenets tribes in Siberia); BOURDEAUX 2000 (Mari El in Russia); MACCULLOCH 1911 (Ancient Celts).
2. Breaking of a vow	5	-	-	-	-	-
3. Transference of the illness to the tree	13	10	8	5	SESSION 1889 (Lebanon); DE BUNSEN 1910, CANAAN 1927, ARAF 1993, SCHULTZ 1852, VILNAY 1963 (Israel). MERRIL 1883, GRANQUIST 1965 (Trans-Jordan); DROWER 1941, FARHADI 1994 (Iran); DIAMANDOPOULOS & MARKETOS 1993 (Cyprus); WESTERMARCK 1968, 1973 (Morocco).	DOWSON 2000, MACCULLOCH 1911 (Ancient Celts).
4. Removal for curing and as charms	15	12	-	-	BALDENSPERGER 1893, CURTISS 1902, CANAAN 1927, VILNAY 1963, ARAF 1993 (Israel); GRANQUIST 1965 (Trans-Jordan); SESSION 1889 (Lebanon); DROWER 1941 (Iran); DIAMANDOPOULOS & MARKETOS 1993 (Cyprus); WESTERMARCK 1968 (Morocco).	
5. Thanks for cure	7	5	-	-	WESTERMARCK 1968 (Morocco).	
6. Visiting card	4	-	-	-	CURTISS 1902, JAUSSEN 1908, CANAAN 1927, YADIN 1990, ARAF 1993 (Israel).	
7. Charm for a new dress	5	-	-	-	ARAF 1993 (Israel).	MAJUPURIA & JOSHI 1997 (India); CHANDERVAKER 1965 (India); BUMANN 1973 (Ancient Greece).
8. To mark a blessed tree	5	-	-	-	-	
9. To mark the way to a blessed tree	6	-	-	-	-	
10. Permission to pick fruit	-	-	4	-	-	
11. Rags for needy people	4	-	-	-	-	
12. To pacify the tree's spirit	-	-	-	-	THOMPSON 1881 (Israel)	CHANDERVAKER 1965, MAJUPURIA & JOSHI 1997 (India); OKELLO-ABUNGO 1994 (Kenya); D'ORBINGY 1839-1843 (Patagonia).
13. To insure good yield	-	-	-	-	-	TAXIER 1907 (French Sudan).
14. Offering to tree deities	-	-	-	-	-	JAMES 1966, SIMOONS 1988 (The Druids); JAMES 1966, SIMOONS 1988 (India); OVSYANNIKOV & TEREBIKHIN 1994 (Nenets tribes in Siberia).
15. To pacify ancestor's spirits	-	-	-	-	-	MUTORO 1994 (Kenya), MAJUPURIA & JOSHI 1977, CHANDERVAKER 1965 (India).

Note: Due to the cultural continuum, Morocco, Turkey, Cyprus and Iran were considered as "Middle East". The numbers in each cell indicate how many informants mentioned the appropriate reason.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Rag colours

ARAF (1993) mentioned that the prominent rag colours in Israel are green and white. Green is common in agricultural areas in the northern part of the country while white is more common in the desert in the southern regions. According to this author, green symbolizes the continuity of the good life and the colour of God's angels' clothes while the white symbolizes purity, clean hands and good intentions. The white colour is also highly visible under the desert conditions.

JAUSSEN (1908) who visited the Moab area (Transjordan) reported "It is not, in fact, uncommon to meet with Arabs who knot a scrap of red or green cloth (never black, rarely white) to the boughs of a sacred tree". In Syria white rags are the most common (ROUSE 1895, reminding that in those days Syria also included Palestine). In Cyprus the cloths hung by the Greek Orthodox are white as a symbol of purity (Edna Heichal 19.6.01, The Israeli Archive of Folklore, Haifa University, pers. com.). Today in Israel one finds cloths and rags of various colours and it is hard to conclude that the green one is the most common (KHNEIPS 2000; our observations).

Green is the sacred colour of the Moslem world. In the 18th century, the Moslem rulers of Palestine forbade the Jews to wear green garments (YAARI 1946). Elijah, one of the most revered prophets in the Islam world, is called "El - Khader", meaning "The Green". The green colour was blessed by him and his followers (AUGUSTINOVIC 1972). As local people told us "We consider our lord El Khader - green, thus we put a green rag for "Barakeh" (a general divine blessing) (Mumammed Ali Khaldi, Khawaled, pers. com. 26.9.00). Rags put on Saints' tombs are frequently green. Pieces of green rags of high quality (termed in Arabic "Stara") are often worn as necklaces or on hands as amulets and for Barakeh (see below), afterward they are left on the tomb or on a sacred tree.

Religious ban of rag tying

The religious establishments of the Druse {8}

as well as those of the Moslems {7} are strictly against the popular custom of hanging rags on sacred trees. Sheik Kassem Bader, the official keeper of the Druse holy tomb of "Nabi Sabalan" (Upper Galilee, one of the most sacred places of the Druse) said explicitly "We don't do it (to tie rags) today, it is not acceptable from a religious viewpoint. You don't have to help God to remember you. Your request is sufficient and you don't have to leave him a reminder, the Nabi (the Prophet Sabalan) will not forget you (after you pray). The object that is left on the tree is valueless, the tree itself is blessed" (9.6.00, pers. comm.). The very reason why it is sacred is that the Nabi (the Prophet) Sabalan prayed underneath it {12}. A similar view was expressed by a religious Moslem (in whose yard there is a huge sacred *Zizyphus spina-christi* (Christ thorn) tree, which is highly revered and worshipped by the villagers) who said "By rag tying on trees humans try to participate in God's deeds and that is wrong, it is forbidden to help God in these decisions" (Abed Hadi Suleiman, Mazra'a, Western Galilee, pers. comm. 20.8.00).

Despite the clear view of the religious leaders, rag tying is very common among the Druse. Two hundred metres from "Nabi Sabalan", the holy grave, there is a sacred grove which is covered with colourful rags and intact cloths, that the locals call "Um e' Sharatit" (Mother of rags). An Arabic proverb, "Mithl um e' sharatit" (like the mother of the rags, means these trees), describes a person who is dressed with old used rags (VILNAY 1963). TRISTRAM (1898) also mentioned "Eastern travelers will recall 'Mother of rags' on the outskirts of the desert, a terebinth covered with the votive offerings of superstitions or affection". This manner is widespread in all the Druse villages in the Galilee (SCHILLER 2000; our observations) and also in Southern Lebanon (KHNEIPS 2000).

In the 10th century a Karaite, Sahel Ben Matsliakh, who lived in Palestine, complained that Jews tied rags to sacred trees as votive offerings (VILNAY 1963), a custom, which strictly violates Jewish laws, which forbids any worship of objects (Exodus, 24:4; Deuteronomy 5:8).

Why rags are hung on sacred trees

1. As votive offerings.

All over the Middle East as well as in Morocco the most common reason for tying rags on trees is to make a votive offering (SMITH 1969). A person is asking for the tree's help (as the dwelling place of the Welly, God's messenger) and mentions that he is requesting a personal favour and tells what he will do in return when the request materialized (DONALDSON 1973; WESTERMARCK 1968). When the vow or request is granted, the person unties the rag while saying "Khal il nader" (the vow is "untied") or "Fak il nader" (the vow is open {7}).

This manner is widespread today in Israel among Druse, Moslems, and even Jews {45}. Sacred trees served as "wishing trees" for personal requests such as: the solution to health problems (SESSION 1889, Druses in Lebanon; WESTERMARCK 1968, Morocco; GRINSELL 1990 and DIAMANDOPOULOS & MARKETOS 1993, Cyprus; YASSIN *et al.* 1999, Turkey and our results {24}); for long life {8}, for childbirth and children's health (JAUSSEN 1908, Jordan; WESTERMARCK 1968, Morocco; YASSIN *et al.*, 1999, Turkey; GRINSELL 1990, Cyprus and Israel {22}); wealth {4}; a good match (YASSIN *et al.* 1999, Turkey and Israel {5}), for husband's kindness (WESTERMARCK 1968, Morocco) or close family reunion (ANONYMOUS 1999, Turkey).

Sheikh Nur Rifaii summarizes in this manner "He whose vow was fulfilled brings rags and puts them on the sacred tree; rags are attached only for vows and are removed from the tree for cures (see below); rag offerings and for thanksgiving, and rag removal is for health "(A Sufian religious leader and healer, Majdal Kurum, Lower Galilee, 27.4.00).

One may distinguish between a "vow" and a "wish". While a person makes a vow it is a kind of a religious obligation to offer something in return after his/her request is granted. It includes a second visit to the sacred tree to untie the rag that was put there before. If a person asks for a personal favour it is with the anticipation that it will materialize via the tree, but the petitioner himself has no further duties to fulfill. Although these two kinds of requests are sharply different, we treated them together because this important distinction

was rarely made in the relevant literature. In both cases it is clear that the tree is the "vehicle" for the saint's supernatural powers to help the believer. In the words of ROBERTSON SMITH (1889), "the clothes are so far part of a man that they can serve as a vehicle of personal communication ...they are not gifts in the ordinary sense, but pledges of attachment".

Rag tying is also a part of a "Mark of reverence" (FABRIDGE 1970) or "Token of homage" (ROBERTSON SMITH 1889). In pagan Arabia there was a tree "to which the people of Mecca resorted annually, and hung upon it weapons, garments, ostrich eggs and other gifts, is spoken of in the tradition of the prophet under the vague name of *dhat anwat*, or "tree to hang things on" (ROBERTSON SMITH 1889). The same manner is also known from old Rome (Tacitus, *Germanica* 10.2; Pliny, *Natural History* XII, 3; Ovid, *Fasti* III, 267). In the Greek temple culture (DOWDEN 2000) the standard word for "dedicate" is *anatithemi*, which means "I put up" and clearly many dedications were attached to the temple wall. The origin of this, however, is surely a practice of leaving offerings in the trees of groves in the days before such temples buildings had appeared. Thus for instance, in the *Odyssey* the prospective murderer of Agamemnon, Aigisthos

Burnt many things on the god's altar
And hung up many dedications, woven
cloth and gold.

Homer, *Odyssey* 3.273. f

The hanging of various objects (including clothes) in some instances is also almost indiscernible from "vow" and "wish" (e.g., objects hanging in the Nenets of Siberia; OVSYANNYKOV & TEREBIKHIN 1994); thus, all these different reasons were lumped under the same umbrella of "votive offerings".

2. Breaking of an already existing vow.

If one is unable to fulfill his/her vow, the regular custom is to sacrifice a goat or sheep {6}. Another possibility {5} is to tie a piece of rag to the blessed tree and to ask the saint to forgive him/her for his/her inability to complete the obligation. This custom was recorded only among the

Druse. Interviewees of other ethnic groups were unfamiliar with it.

3. Transference of the illness to the tree.

The transference of the illness from the sick man to the sacred tree, the dwelling place of the Saint, was done by tying his cloth or a piece of it to the tree (ARAF 1993). This was a common manner in the Middle East (SESSION 1889; SCHULTZ 1852; CURTIS 1902; JAUSSEN 1908; DE BUNSEN 1910; VILNAY 1963; GRANQUIST 1965; CANAAN 1927; MERRILL 1883) as well as in Morocco (WESTERMARCK 1968, 1973), Iran (DROWER 1941; FARHADI 1994) and Cyprus (DIAMANDOPOULOS & MARKETOS 1993).

CANAAN (1927) tells us that "Very often a sick person tears a small piece from his clothes and ties it with the words 'I have thrown my burden (i.e., 'my sickness') on thee, O man of God'. It is firmly believed that the saint will banish the disease". DE BUNSEN (1910) describes in detail the pilgrimage of a mother with her sick baby to a sacred tree in Southern Syria (Northern Israel of today) "The baby still wears a ragged little cotton shirt under the swaddling band, and from this the mother carefully tears a rag...She holds the polluted discoloured thing - the holy thing -the little rag in her hand. All the fever and the pain and the weakness of her child is concentrated and bound up in the rag. It was her duty to bring the concentrated evil, that heavy-laden rag, into contact with the holy, life-giving tree. The rag must be bound to it, cast off upon its branches..."

According to WESTERMARCK (1973), by tying of hair or pieces of cloths to saintly objects, the petitioner expects to profit by the "Barakeh" of the object with which he/she comes into contact, and in certain instances the idea of disease-transference is conspicuously present in his/her mind. When GRANQUIST (1965) asked people why they tie rags or a cloth to a tree, the answer was "And when thou leavest, then thou tiest a knot to a branch of the tree, and sayest 'Stay there thou evil!' This is said three times. The sickness must pass out of the patient's body, because it is 'fastened' to the tree".

The manner of tying clothes to trees for transference of personal troubles is a typical living example of "Contact Magic." FRAZER (1944) explains "Things which have once been in contact

with each other continue to act on each other at a distance after the physical contact has been severed". CANAAN (1927) remarks "Thus these pieces of cloth always keep their connection with the person from whom they came. They represent him, and anything done to them will happen to the owner. They represent the visitor, reminding the holy man of the visit performed, imploring help and begging for cure". Hence, an object (e.g. the cloth) that was hanging on the sacred tree and absorbed its spirit will continue to act on the person to whom it will come into contact.

This custom is very common today in Israel {36} among Moslems, Druse, and Christian Arabs. Recently, during the last three decades, Jewish people have "imported" this practice from Morocco from whence they immigrated. VILNAY (1963) mentioned that "nowadays the Jews are not tying rags on trees (to get rid of sickness), this is more common among the Arabs" and this reality is changing now, in the presence of our own eyes, as a part of the revival process the reverence of Saints in Israel today.

4. Removal of rags from the tree for curing purposes.

A cloth that is left on the sacred tree acquires curative properties (ARAF 1993). Sheikh Nur Rifaii testifies that "We hang a green cloth on the sacred tree and later we take it and use it for practical medicine. The faith returns, via the cloth to the healer, as well as to the client as a part of the healing process". The idea is that the cloth absorbs the magical power of the saint as another manifestation of Magic Contact.

Cloths that were left on trees (not necessarily by the same people) are taken back and are used for the following purposes: Curing of various diseases and illnesses; for a general divine blessing (Barakeh); as amulets, talismans, charms and omens; to insure "good health"; against the evil eye; to expel "Djins" (evil spirit); "to protect the family", etc. This manner is known, in our region in: Israel (BALDENSPERGER 1893; CURTISS 1902; CANAAN 1927; VILNAY 1963), Jordan (GRANQUIST 1965), Lebanon (SESSION 1889), Iran (DROWER 1941) and Cyprus (DIAMANDOPOULOS & MARKETOS 1993). Today this manner is quite widespread in Israel {27}.

The Druse are very cautious to treat revered trees as "Blessed trees" and never as "Sacred trees". According to their religion, only human beings can be saints and objects can only be "blessed" by the holy figures {14}. Thus, by taking rags from the "blessed tree" the blessing of the saint is transferred to the person who is taking it as "a blessing from God" {6}.

5. As thanks for curing.

In Morocco people tie rags in thanksgiving for recovering from an illness in addition to tying them for the help of the saint (WESTERMARCK 1968). The same manner was also found in Israel among Arabs {5} as well as Druse {7} and was also reported from North China (GAMBLE 1954).

In Russia (Mari El Republic, along the Volga River, 400 miles east of Moscow) there is still a pagan sacrifice of animals today. "Cloth belts stained with the blood of these sacrificial animals are hung from trees. Higher up, the branches are festooned with votive offering items of clothing brought by people who claim to have been cured during earlier sacrifices" (BOURDEAUX 2000). This evidence may shed light on one possible origin of the manner to tie rags for curing as a part of a sacrificial ceremony. According to the same author the Mari El paganism survives in dense forests and sacred groves that are an important component of their worship.

6. As a "visiting card".

A piece of personal cloth of the petitioner is hung on the tree as a kind of a reminder or a "visiting card" left to the saint so that he does not forget the wishes of the believer. By this action a "magic connection" is established between the saint and the worshippers. The cloth represents the presence of the believer and asks for continuous help (CURTISS 1902; JAUSSEN 1908; CANAAN 1927; YADIN 1990). In other words "A symbol and stress for the saint that the visit was done" (ARAF 1993). It could also be considered as a kind of a Contact Magic (FRAZER 1944). We were unable to find the prevalence of this act in Israel today although few interviewees {4} had heard about it indirectly.

7. As a charm to have a new dress.

According to ARAF (1993), there is a sacred Hawk thorn (*Crataegus azarolus*) tree, which is called "Sheikh Za'arur" (Za'arur means "Hawk thorn"). People used to hang old clothes on this specific tree in hopes to have new clothes soon. A similar story comes from India. A person, who will bring a rag offering to the sacred *Ficus benjamina*, will get a blessing to return with new clothes (MAJUPURIA & JOSHI 1997). We did not find any footprints of this manner in our study.

8. To mark a sacred tree.

A few interviewees {5}, all of whom were Druse, mentioned that rags are tied on trees "To announce that these are blessed trees". By that sign they will prevent any harm to the tree and avoid consequent punishment by the saint. In India sacred trees are marked with rags to prevent travelers from cutting them, which is strictly forbidden (CHANDERVAKER 1965). BAUMANN (1993) presents a Roman bas-relief (see above): "To mark its sacred nature the trunk is enriched by a band".

9. To mark the way to a sacred place.

In Beit Jan (Upper Galilee) there is a tomb of Baha el Din that is sacred to the Druse. The pilgrims on their way to the holy place tie rags on various bushes along the steep way leading to the holy place. People rest beneath these bushes and express their thanks for the shade that they give. The bushes are blessed because they mark the way to the holy grave {6}.

10. To ask for permission to pick fruit.

The consumption of fruit taken from sacred trees is strictly forbidden and people who dare to pick it will be severely punished (CANAAN 1927). In general there is a strict ban even to pick a leaf from a sacred tree (WESTERMARCK 1968; VILNAY 1963), and the punishment could be very serious {49}. Some Bedouin in the Lower Galilee {4} commonly hang green rags of special quality ("Stara") on the trees of the Mt. Tabor oak (*Quercus ithaburensis*) to ask for the permission of the saint to use the fruit without being harmed. This oak species has large edible acorns, which are highly appreciated as a staple food, especially

in hard times (DAFNI 1984).

11. Rags for needy people.

A family which is deprived of children vows that if they will have a child one day, they will dress him not with beautiful clothes but, instead, only with old ones that other people left on the blessed trees for charity. This manner was common (at least until 50-60 years ago) in some Druse villages. Families, which have children and were in a good economic situation, contributed second hand clothes for the needy by putting them, discretely at night, on the blessed tree. The poor took the clothes when they were needed {4}. The following evidence exemplifies this custom. "Around 1920, the father of the interviewee was playing under the blessed tree (*Ziziphus spinachriti*) of Sheikh Rabis in Mrar (Lower Galilee), when he found a garment underneath and wore it. The following night he had nightmares and was unable to sleep and in the morning he was seriously ill. His mother asked him about the event and when she realized that he had taken the garment from the blessed tree, she returned it to the tree and he was cured immediately (Ali Araid, Mrar, pers comm. 19.5.01).

12. To pacify the tree spirits.

THOMPSON (1881) who traveled in Palestine in the 19th century, reported that the local inhabitants believed that spirits that were called "Jacob's Daughters" occupied many sacred trees. People were afraid of these trees and when they passed near by they used to hang a piece of their own clothes on the tree "as an acknowledgement of their presence, and a sort of peace offering to avert their anger". Some trees in Israel are known to be haunted by evil spirits and people are warned to avoid them, and especially not to sleep underneath (CROWFOOT & BALDENSPERGER 1932). No one, nowadays, puts any rags on these trees and this manner was unknown to all our interviewees.

In India, travelers in the desert that passed by sacred trees (of *Acacia arabica* and *Prosopis spicigera*), which were believed to be haunted by spirits of Moslem saints, frequently presented the trees some offerings to avoid any harm that could be caused by the trees' spirits. They had to pacify these spirits, which were expecting an offering of

cloth and a coin from every passerby (CHANDERVAKER 1965; MAJUPURIA & JOSHI 1997). According to a popular belief in India, a child will become ill if his/her mother passes near a sacred tree of *Ficus benjamina* without offering it a piece of cloth. Naïve people bring cloth presents whenever they pass near these trees (MAJUPURIA & JOSHI 1997). OKELLO-ABUNGO (1994) describes Moslem manners regarding sacred trees in coastal Kenya as follows "Because the belief in the presence of spirits within this area, offerings of food, incense and rose water are often made to please the spirits; also, 'flags' of cloth are hung from the large trees ... "In Patagonia the Indians revere old *Acacia* trees as the abode of a spirit and hang offerings of blankets, ponchos, ribbons and coloured threads on it. So that the tree presents the aspect of an old clothe shop... No Indian passes it without leaving something, if it be only a little horse-hair which he ties to a branch" (D'ORBINGY 1839-1843, II, 157, in FRAZER 1990).

13. To insure good harvest.

In French Sudan (Mossi tribe near Niger border) people hang cloths and different objects on sacred trees to insure a good harvest from the crops (FRAZER 1963, citing TAXIER 1907). A similar ceremony which is not related to sacred trees is described by SESSION (1889) from Lebanon: "On Epiphany, the fruit-trees are said to bow their heads in adoration of Christ, and then women hang a piece of dough (bread of life, and sacred as well; see below) wrapped in a cloth on the bough of a tree".

14. As offerings to the tree deities/spirits.

In the Siberian tundra in the Kanin region the Nenets tribes have sacred groves. Any passerby through these groves has to offer the trees offerings of cloth and other objects like metal bells and various tools as gifts (OVSYANNIKOV & TEREBIKHIN 1994). According to NOVIK (1994) the presented offerings, including cloths, are a means to establish the connection between the secular and the sacred worlds. The offerings to sacred trees supply the connection between people and the spirits. SMITH (1969) argues that the very reason to hang cloth is that in ancient times trees were considered as gods and were honoured with

libations and sacrifices (which are now replaced by cloth), and they confer the power of life for the coming generations. In India a cloth offering to the tree deities is quite common (JAMES 1966; SIMOONS 1988).

15. To pacify the ancestor's spirits.

In Kenya, in the Mijikenda tribe, there is a custom of hanging cloths on sacred trees as offerings to the spirits of the tribe's ancestors (MUTORO 1994). In India cloth and other offerings are provided to the sacred trees of *Ficus benjamina* to ask the souls of the dead people, which are dwelling in these trees, for atonement and forgiveness (MAJUPURIA & JOSHI 1997; CHANDERVAKER 1965; the last author mentioned the manner but without indication of any tree species).

The present study surveyed 15 reasons for tying rags on sacred trees. Five reasons (breaking of an already existing oath, to mark a blessed tree, to mark the road to a blessed tree, to ask for permission to pick fruit, and to put rags for needy people) as far as the author is aware, have never before been reported in the relevant literature. Thus, they could be regarded as endemic to Israel and to the Druse. The Druse in Lebanon and Syria probably also practice these five customs, because their attitude towards the worship of blessed trees is indiscernible from their counterparts in Israel (KHNEIPS 2000). Two manners (to pacify the tree's spirit and charm for new clothes) were previously reported from Israel but were not confirmed by us in the present survey. Three reasons (transference of the illness to the tree, rag as a visiting card and to pacify the tree's spirits) are also known beyond the Middle East. Three reasons (to insure a good yield, offerings to tree's deities/spirits and to pacify the ancestor's spirits) were never reported from our region and are connected with pagan polytheistic religions.

Twelve out of the 15 world known reasons for hanging rags on sacred trees are reported from Israel. This finding elucidates the widespread and variable tree worship traditions prevailing in Israel today. In spite of the monotheistic ban against these ancient pagan manners of tree veneration it is actively worshipped in Israel as has already been expressed by FRAZER (1919) "Thus the worship at high places and green trees, which pious Hebrew kings forbade and prophets thundered against thousands of years ago, persists apparently in the same place today".

Tree worship is especially popular in the Druse villages as well as in rural Moslem areas. It is less common, however, among the Bedouins and even more rare in the Christian Arab society (most of which does not live in the rural communities), but it has shown recent growth in the Jewish sector.

Although some specific customs (rags for needy people, rags as a visiting card, as a charm for new dress, to mark a blessed tree, to mark the way to a blessed tree and breaking of an existing oath) are perhaps vanishing, sacred trees are still highly venerated today in Israel, especially for personal vows and wishes, for the seeking of good health and for a general blessing.

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