

COMMENTS ON THE INDIAN TRADE CLOTH KNOWN AS THE TREE OF LIFE AND ITS CONTEXT

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Fig 1 / Tree of Life Sarasa
India, for the Indonesian market
Cotton; painted mordant and resist dyed
Late 17th/early 18th century

There are few human archetypes as universal as the Tree of Life. Religions originating in Asia, Africa, Europe, the New World, Oceania and Australia, be they highly organized or tribal-animistic, all seem to embrace the concept of a primordial tree, always with great roots and branches, often fruit laden and flowering. This is so from the Biblical Tree of Life in the "Garden of Eden," to the ancient Olmec "world tree" of earliest Mexico and from the Taoist traditions of China to the barbarian Norse and German tribes, with their "fertility tree" concept. What interests us here is that in every case there existed an *axis mundi* "earth's navel" that tended to be marked by tree symbolism. The Hebrew Kaballah takes the Tree to extreme intellectual abstraction, but it is still the tree. Even unto the present, Modern Science, a belief system that may be thought of as a secular religion, describes biological phenomena such as evolution in terms of a Tree of Life.

Most of these religions may be thought of as arising from a yet earlier time and culture, that of Neolithic man. When agriculture was first developing, the tree served as a metaphor for the Cosmos. Nearly all remote and isolated peoples, when interviewed shortly after first contact, described a similar belief system: a sacred tree that grows with roots in the Underworld, the land of reptiles from where we came; a mighty tree whose branches reach into the sky, the land of birds and ancestors and the place where we are all going following our time here in the Middle World. The most ancient cultures on earth, the Australian Aborigines and the Kalahari Bushmen of South Africa, now known as San, each include a tree of life in their *Welt Anschauung*. The breadth of scope in a semiotic sense for this universal concept might suggest that the tale of the Tree of Life might well have been amongst the first mutually understandable utterances vocalized around the fire following the develop-

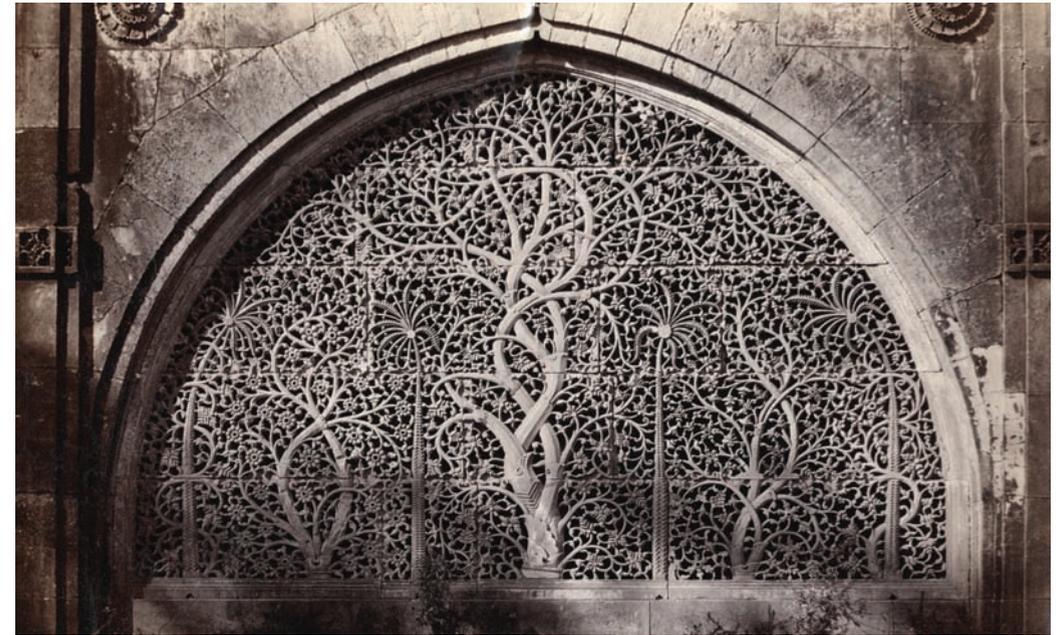


Fig 2 / Sidi Saiyyed Mosque, 1573,
Ahmedabad, India
Photo circa 1870

ment of human speech and syntax, somewhere between fifty and one hundred thousand years ago.

In Indonesia, Tree of Life mythology is very rich and based upon ancient Austronesian concepts dating to the migrations from the SE Asian Mainland beginning 3000 BC at a minimum. Anthropologists note two sub-styles of emphasis depending on whether we are speaking of the Western or Eastern islands of Indonesia. On Sumatra, the world's fourth largest island and one of Indonesia's most westerly, there is the creation myth of a primordial tree that grew up from the underworld to the upper world and then shattered into pieces; as the fragments fell down to earth, they changed form into the first water buffalo, rice paddies and people. The eastern islands are noted for almost always having a tree of life in the center of the village that tends to display two forked branches, which are a visual cue reinforcing local beliefs about duality, as in night-day, man-woman, sword-cloth to name but a few.

It is for the above reason that when Arab, Indian, and ultimately European traders, (beginning with the Portuguese and then the Dutch VOC, *Vereenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie*), started bringing in prestige silks and printed cloths, *sarasa*, from India to be exchanged for spices like pepper, nutmeg, cloves, and cinnamon for example. Trade textiles from India with a



Fig 3 / "Big Leaf" Sarasa (detail)
India, for the Toraja market
Cotton; block printed, painted
mordant and resist dyed
Late 13th/early 15th century, C-14 tested
Private Collection



Fig 4 / *Sarita* Ritual Banner (detail)
Toraja People, Sulawesi
Cotton; primitive batik
19th/early 20th century

Tree of Life pattern had great currency and immediate recognition with their indigenous trading partners. As a result, many interesting variations of the tree subject have appeared through the years designed to appeal to both courts and tribes. We wish to concern ourselves with the sequencing of some of these styles in an art historical sense over time and space. In so doing we encounter a world far more cosmopolitan than is often understood, tied together by trade and an international fashion, while still preserving underlying archaic themes, as in this case of the Tree of Life.

All the trade cloths we will be speaking of in this essay are made from handspun cotton and patterned with hand painted mordant and wax (or the like) resists, which after being soaked in a progression of vat dyes were then painted again with yet other dye colors. It is a time consuming and laborious process but at their peak, no one else in the 17th/18th century world could compare to the Indians for their artistic ingenuity and prudent business sense in producing pleasing cloths that could have a great variety of colors and compelling designs created to appeal to the taste of every local market, and at the same time be color-fast and easily washable. They were, to quote the title of Textile Museum curator Mattiebelle Gittinger's early book, "Master Dyers to the World."

I begin this project by looking at figure 1 probably the most classic and universally recognized Tree of Life style of all known variations. The question arises, does this design come from a European source or is it Indian? Or did the foreign traders of antiquity bring back to India indigenous sample textiles with tree iconography that were already in use and were known to have broad appeal? John Guy took up this question in his landmark book, *Woven Cargoes*; Ruth Barnes contributed "Indian Textiles for Island Taste" to the book *Textiles from India*, edited by Rosemary Crill. Robyn Maxwell of the National Gallery of Australia has ruminated on this topic in her books, *Textiles of SE Asia* and *From Sari to Sarong*, while the present author made a contribution to the literature with "The Ship and the Tree", an article that appeared in HALI #101. I encourage the interested reader to go to these original sources and others to dig deeper into this worthy topic, the discussion of which must necessarily be foreshortened by space available.

In India proper there has long been a reverence for the Tree of Life as observed for example in the Bodhi Tree under which the Buddha gained enlightenment, while the Pipal tree is very important in many Hindu mythologies. The notion of a sacred tree plays as well a prominent role in beliefs and aesthetics of Islam, observed in figure 2, a finely carved stone window at Sidi Saiyyed

Mosque, in Ahmedabad, India, which is not only beautiful but also very important in an art historical sense. The fine line tree drawings of its windows date to 1573, well before any significant European influence on the artistic style of the region; it can therefore be stated that there existed an Indian Tree prototype well before the influence of European "taste" in tree stylization had arrived to the Subcontinent.

The question of how early may we find a tree of life in an Indian cloth brings us to figure 3, a detail of a "large leaf" style of Indian Trade Cloth which shows flowering plants with pearl borders growing out of a rockery, smaller and not as developed as the mountain referenced in the base of figure 1 but still recognizable as a Tree of Life. Textiles of this sort have been radiocarbon dated with certainty from the late 13th to the early 15th century. Such cloths were especially beloved by the Toraja people of central Sulawesi, Indonesia, who had a custom of preserving trade textiles to be used in their rituals and ceremonies. This accumulated wealth of sacred textiles has proven to be the greatest repository of historic Indian trade cloths to come to light, including many forms of the tree of life. The Toraja also made their own textiles that featured trees using bee's wax on local handspun, in a primitive batik process. Since all known *mawas* and *saritas* are presumed later than the earliest Indian trade cloths found in the same area, we cannot say for certain which tradition influenced the other first. This puzzle provides a key example of the phenomena of cultural oscillation and cross-pollination of iconography and meaning (fig 5).

The Toraja were headhunters, a custom they shared with the warriors of Sumba, an island to the south of Sulawesi, found between Bali and New Guinea. The Sumbanese, who practice the ancient animistic religion *Marapu*, were known to create skull trees at the entrance of their villages from trophy heads they had taken during war parties. Such trees brought vital life force to the community. This iconic form of the tree of life may be viewed between two ancestors in this detail of a 1920s period queen's sarong called a *lau pahudu* woven on a backstrap loom with supplementary warp patterning.

The Lampung district of southern Sumatra has proven to be the other great home of both indigenous tree of life iconography and tree trade cloths of the type we began this discussion with, seen in figure 1. During important ceremonies, Trees of Life were created out of great bamboo poles with textiles and other offerings hanging from the branches that were erected and when the life transition had taken place, the tree was "destroyed" recreating the Austronesian creation myth, mentioned above.



Fig 5 / *Lau Pahudu*
Noble Woman's Skirt (detail)
East Sumba
Cotton; supplementary warp
Early 20th century



Fig 6 / *Kalianda Tree Tampan*
Lampung, Sumatra
Cotton; supplementary weft
19th century



Fig 7 / Sambagi Shoulder Cloth (detail)
India, for the Indonesian market
Cotton; painted mordant and resist dyed
18th century



Fig 8 / Batik Tulis Sarong (detail)
Northcoast Java
Indo-Chinese workshop, Northcoast Java
Cotton, hand drawn wax-resist
Circa 1930

A local ritual cloth known as a *tampam* was used as a “token” textile that carried deep symbolic meaning within the culture. *Tampans*, many with boat iconography and often with a tree present, were exchanged in various social contexts known by anthropologists as “life crisis events” that included births, puberty, weddings, attaining a rank (i.e. becoming a clan leader) and funerary rites. The Kalianda region of Lampung, considered the “mother culture” of the area, created some very fine tree of life *tampans* that may be interpreted to be composed of “stacked boats” (fig 6).

The tree of life is thought to take another stylized form, that of the isosceles triangle border element known as a *tumpal* (fig 7). This device is not found as a motif on textiles of the Indian Mainland proper and we can therefore surmise that at some point in time traders requested that it be included to suit the taste of the Indonesian market, where it has been a long appreciated motif, found for example as decoration on Dongson Bronze Age drums dating 400BC–200AD in the area. This concept is illustrated by this 18th century trade cloth *sambagi*, where we can see a direct correspondence between the *tumpal*, with its flowering vine contained within, and the Tree of Life. Traude Gavin offers an intriguing discussion on the nature of the *tumpal* as interpreted by Western art historians in her essay “Triangle and Tree: Austronesian Themes in the Design Interpretation of Indonesian Textiles” in the new book, *Five Centuries of Indonesian Textiles*, edited by Ruth Barnes and Mary H. Kahlenberg. This is a good read!

Trade cloth yielded in the 19th century to Javanese batik, the natural inheritor of the Indian resist dye tradition. The bouquet of flowers as a subject seen in this 1930s sarong (fig 8) made in a North Coast Indo-Chinese workshop may at first be thought of as exclusively a Dutch art nouveau influence, but it is this author’s contention that the indigenous psyche would interpret it, perhaps subliminally, as referencing the much earlier Tree of Life concept. So too with the trade cloth waist wrap made for the Thai court called a *phaa nung*. It features a palmette design covered with gold gilt (fig 9). This motif is a kind of shorthand for the Tree that would be recognized as such by all who live within the culture. That the Indians served many markets is one of my primary themes; it is there-

fore of interest to see the Mughal influenced *kalamkari* found in Tibet (fig 10). It features a *mihrab* with flowering pot that brings to mind the Tree of Life and dates to the 18th Century or earlier.

We will now consider European taste as evidenced by this Tree of Life made on India’s eastern Coromandel Coast. Featuring very refined free hand painting and dating to the 18th century (fig 11), it has a provenance going back to Parham Park, one of the greatest of old English noble houses. A suite of them came out of the chintz room, where it was customary for the lady of the house to meet guests for tea. Such trees would remind the viewer of the natural order of life, the noble aristocracy on top in this world and the Paradise that awaits the good and the decent who respect this order in the next.

Lastly, I draw your attention to this exceptional and fully European version of the Tree of Life, called a *Castelo Branco*. (fig 12). With its “all indigo” silk embroidery on an ivory linen background, this wonderful Tree seems to come from the Garden of Paradise. Although influenced by the Indian prototypes and similar to some English crewelwork, *Castelo Branco* (white castle) coverlets were named for the town where they were made, and were unique to 18th century Portugal. I think the reader needs no reminder that Portugal was the first European country to make it around the previously impassible Cape of Good Hope and establish a trading base, first in India and later Indonesia, following Vasco da Gama’s arrival to the subcontinent in 1498. By the 18th century there were strong connections between Goa, the primary Portuguese colony in the Indian Ocean and the Homeland, as observed by this very Indianized Tree of Life motif.

And so we arrive back to where we started in a Jungian sense on this journey of discovery, as a rolling serpent with its tail in its mouth returns, but now with a deeper understanding of the Tree of Life; first identifying it to be an archetype of the human collective unconscious, revealed and made manifest through these great works of cross cultural textile art.

The author would like to acknowledge with great thanks the invitation by Caskey-Lees to mount a special exhibition at the New York Arts of Pacific Asia



Fig 9 / Phaa Nung Court Costume (detail)
India, for the Thai market
Cotton; painted mordant and resist dyed, gold gilt
Late 18th/very early 19th century



Fig 10 / Kalamkari Ritual Hanging (detail)
India, for the Tibetan market
Cotton; Block printed, painted mordant and resist dyed
18th century or earlier



Fig 11, a&b / Chintz Tree from Parham Park House (with detail)

India, for the European market
Cotton; painted mordant and resist dyed
18th century



Show entrance and contribute an essay to the catalog; the fine work of Marcia Loeb to design and lay out the article was essential to its success for which I am most grateful; without a good editor this writer is nothing, thank you Sylvie Reynolds for where you have trimmed and where you encouraged expansion, not to mention your many good ideas; Clare Graham and Bob Breen are geniuses among us for their ability to take a

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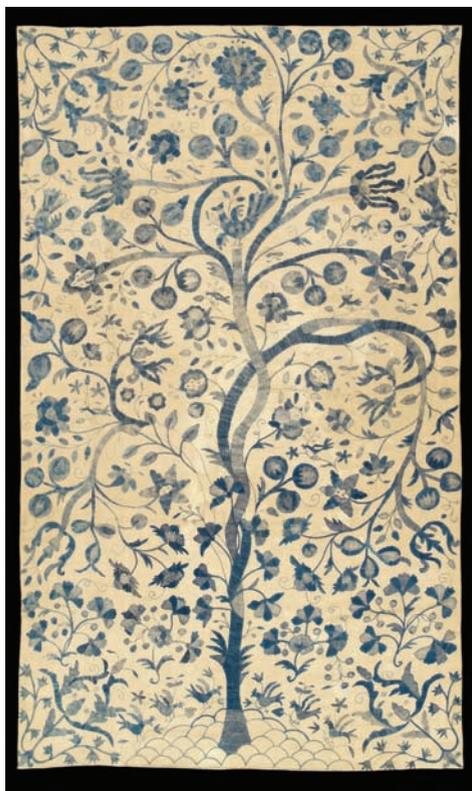


Fig 12 / Castelo Branco Coverlet

Portugal
Linen, silk; embroidery
Mid 18th century

EXHIBITORS