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VEGETAL SYMBOLS AND THE SEMIOTICS OF NATURE
IN ELIADE'S WORK

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Abstract The paper examines conceptualization of plants, trees, and the natural world as fundamental mediators between the sacred and the profane in Eliade's work, which are integral to the construction of cultural semiotics and mythic imagination. Mircea Eliade's extensive contributions to the phenomenology of religion and cultural semiotics encompass a sustained inquiry into the symbolic dimensions of nature, particularly vegetal imagery. Segal (2001) outlines theoretical approaches to myth, positioning Eliade's phenomenological approach within a broader comparative discourse. It is highly agreed upon that Eliade's view remains central to myth theory (Segal, 2001). By situating Eliade's thought within broader mythological and philosophical traditions, the paper elucidates how vegetal symbolism articulates the cyclical logic of life, death, and rebirth central to religious cosmologies.

The paper further interrogates the epistemological and metaphysical implications of Eliade's approach, arguing that his treatment of natural symbolism constitutes not merely an interpretive motif but a profound theory of meaning-making rooted in sacred ontology. Through a close reading of his discussions of the cosmic tree, the symbolism of regeneration, and hierophanies within the natural environment, the study explores how Eliade positions vegetal life as a site of revelation and renewal. Nature, in Eliade's framework, emerges as a cosmic manuscript, a living, symbolic text authored by divine agency, wherein plants and trees function as semiotic nodes that render metaphysical realities perceptible to human consciousness. Methodologically, the analysis employs conceptual metaphor theory to uncover the cognitive and semiotic mechanisms through which Eliade transforms natural forms into vehicles of transcendence, thereby bridging phenomenological philosophy, conceptual metaphor analysis, and mythopoetic approaches.

• Introduction

The Romanian historian of religious ideas Mircea Eliade developed one of the most influential frameworks in the phenomenology of religion, which is relevant to us for its treatment of nature and the plant world as a central dimension of human ontological experience. Eliade conceived vegetal and arboreal imagery not as peripheral metaphors, but as foundational for how the sacred is manifested in the world of the profane. He argued that trees, plants and vegetation function as hierophanies (manifestations of the sacred) by participating in a transcendent reality. In his view, "vegetation is the manifestation of living reality, of the life that renews itself periodically".

Vegetal life articulates the cosmic structure of meaning: life-death-rebirth, axis mundi, centre and periphery, the myth of eternal return, and the sacred-profane dichotomy. The tree becomes a microcosm of the cosmos, roots plunging into the under-world, trunk on earth, branches ascending toward heaven and thus encoding a semiotic logic of orientation and constant renewal of life.

• Material and method

This study adopts a qualitative, interpretive methodology drawing on textual exegesis, conceptual metaphor analysis and semiotic-phenomenological framing. The approach can be summarised in three interlocking strands subsumed by cultural semiotic analysis. The paper performs a textual exegesis of Eliade's corpus, aiming to explore how trees, plants, and vegetation represent not merely background scenery but fundamental mythic structures in Eliade's thought.

Given the theoretical nature of this study, the data consist of Eliade's texts, secondary literature and selected mythological/ritual case-studies. The analysis proceeds by: (1) mapping vegetal motifs in Eliade's corpus; (2) coding those motifs in terms of metaphor-categories (e.g., renewal, axis, hierophany, cosmos); (3) interpreting how these metaphors function semiotically to mediate sacred/profane distinction and religious experience; (4) situating findings in comparative context and reflecting on the epistemological implications (e.g., how vegetal mediation changes the ontology of the sacred).

• Results and discussions

The paper aims to (1) trace how Eliade conceptualises plants, trees and vegetation as mediators between sacred and profane; (2) situate this conceptualisation within global mythological and philosophical traditions (for example, cosmic tree myths, vegetation cults, axis mundi imagery); (3) interrogate the epistemological and metaphysical implications of his approach (i.e., what does it mean for religious experience, ontology, and human consciousness when vegetation is treated as a semiotic mediator of transcendence); and (4) employ conceptual metaphor theory and semiotic frameworks to unpack the cognitive and experiential mechanisms by which vegetal imagery becomes a vehicle of transcendence in Eliade's thought.

For example, in his *The Sacred and the Profane* (2000), Eliade notes that "the tree came to express everything that religious man regards as pre-eminently real and sacred ... life, youth, immortality, wisdom." By situating the tree within the broader context of sacred geography and mythology, he demonstrates how this natural element serves as a bridge between the human and the divine, the temporal and the eternal. The tree, in Eliade's framework, becomes a living metaphor for the cyclical nature of existence and the perennial quest for spiritual transcendence. This perspective aligns with contemporary ecosemiotic approaches that view nature as a semiotic system, where elements like trees function as signs conveying deeper meanings to those who engage with the natural world, recognizing it as a text rich with metaphysical significance.

• Conclusions

In conclusion, the paper demonstrates that Mircea Eliade's treatment of plants, trees, and the natural world extends beyond symbolic ornamentation to function as a central framework for understanding sacred reality. Vegetal imagery, within Eliade's thought, operates as a semiotic conduit, mediating between the sacred and profane and articulating fundamental cosmological cycles of life, death, and renewal. By integrating phenomenology, cultural semiotics, and conceptual metaphor theory, the study underscores how nature itself becomes a dynamic text of divine revelation, revealing the intricate interplay between human consciousness and mythic imagination. Eliade's vegetal symbolism thus emerges as a vital site for exploring the epistemological and metaphysical dimensions of meaning-making in religious and mythopoetic contexts.