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Sacred Thresholds: Liminal Landscapes and Transcultural Ecologies of Sacred Groves

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Abstract—This paper explores the concept of sacred groves as transcultural ecological spaces that function as liminal landscapes bridging the material and spiritual realms. Through a transcultural ecological lens, it examines how sacred groves across diverse cultures like India's *kaavu*, Japan's *chinju no mori*, Okinawa's *Utaki*, and Nigeria's *Osun-Osogbo*, are preserved not through formal legal mechanisms but through myths, rituals and spiritual beliefs. These groves serve as ecological sanctuaries where taboos, fear of divine punishment and respect for nature enforce conservation. Analyzing sacred groves as liminal spaces, the paper highlights their role as thresholds between the human and the divine, the mundane and the sacred. Myths surrounding these sites instil ecological ethics, encouraging sustainable relationships with nature. The study argues that these culturally embedded conservation practices offer valuable insights for contemporary environmental crises. Sacred groves exemplify how spirituality and cultural narratives can function as powerful ecological laws transcending geographic and cultural boundaries.

Keywords—Ecological Ethics, Liminality, Myth, Sacred Groves, Transcultural Ecology.

I. INTRODUCTION

Transcultural Ecology is an emerging field of study that focuses on the interrelations between culture and environment across different societies. It looks into how different cultural, religious and ritualistic traditions contribute towards environmental conservation and sustainable practices across the world. Conventionally, nature and culture are often studied as binaries. However, they are deeply intertwined in certain cultural practices around the world. One of the most fascinating manifestations of this is the sacred groves in various cultures. Sacred groves are patches of land that are protected neither by strict laws or rules but by mythical, religious, ritualistic or cultural beliefs. They clearly stand as a testament of how religious beliefs perform as ecological laws. Transcultural ecology becomes a bridge between ancient myths and ecological concerns. It merges different disciplines like mythology, ecology, spirituality and so on. Such myths have often been a significant part of human cultures since long ago. The resilience of these

groves suggests the enduring power of belief systems in the preservation of ecology.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Several studies emphasize how sacred groves function as ecological and spiritual spaces across cultures. Kanjirath and Bhagwatin their study highlight Indian sacred groves as biodiversity sanctuaries preserved through religious beliefs rather than legal mechanisms. Chandran and Hughes show how taboos protect South India's *kan* forests. Similarly, Moore and Atherton discuss Japan's *chinju no mori*, where *kami* spirits safeguard nature. Chouin examines Ghana's sacred groves as spiritual landscapes shaped by rituals, while Gold and Gujar document divine conservation practices in Rajasthan. Most research focuses on individual regions, lacking a comprehensive transcultural perspective. This study addresses that gap by exploring sacred groves as universal liminal landscapes where myths, ecological ethics and spirituality intersect, offering a shared ecological framework rooted in cultural narratives worldwide.

III. METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative research method using textual and comparative analysis. It draws from secondary sources such as articles, ethnographic studies and cultural texts on sacred groves, liminality and transcultural ecology. The research applies Victor Turner's theory of liminality to interpret sacred groves as spiritual thresholds and uses transcultural ecology to explore how myths, rituals and spiritual beliefs foster ecological conservation. Data is collected from case studies from India, Japan, Okinawa, Nigeria and Celtic traditions. Thematic analysis identifies common patterns like taboos, fear-based ecological ethics and myth-driven conservation. The research remains interpretative and focuses on narratives and symbolism. It offers a comparative perspective on the role of sacred groves globally. The study aims to bridge cultural perspectives and highlight sacred groves as transcultural models of sustainable ecological practices rooted in spiritual traditions.

IV. ECOLOGICAL BELIEFS: A GLOBAL PHENOMENON

Every culture is known to have its own unique sacred groves that are religiously and culturally important.

They are areas that are mostly untouched and preserved as sacred for the divinity they carry. They basically make use of the belief systems that make people to preserve the natural resources. The belief system that the divine resides in the groves makes it a place worth worship. Thereby, it becomes a place or a threshold that cannot be crossed. This basically upholds the value of the ecology that needs to be preserved.

Transcultural ecology explores how different cultures integrate ritualistic and religious practices for the protection of ecology. Sacred groves play a key role in it as they create narratives that connect communities to nature on a spiritual level. It thereby creates an intricate link between myth and nature thus making sacred groves a universal template for understanding ecological values. Sacred groves are dedicated to different spirits, deities and sometimes to ancestors. They are often protected by taboos and religious rituals that prevent people from exploiting them. They incite a sense of fear and respect.

In India, *kaavu* in Kerala, *devrai* in Maharashtra, *nandavana* in Tamil Nadu and *devarakadu* in Karnataka are some examples of sacred groves that are dedicated to local deities and spirits. “The sacred grove in India is a confluence of cultural, religious, and ecological values, providing a sanctuary for both the human spirit and the natural world” (Kanjirath and Bhagwat 65). In India, they are mostly associated as abodes of deities and therefore have restrictions. The *kan* forests of Uttara Kannada are significant examples. In a study, M. D SubashChandran and J Donald Hughes states:

Kan forests, as they are called in our study district, are sacred groves, patches of natural tropical evergreen forests protected and used as places of worship by peasant communities. That the kans of Uttara Kannada and Shivamoga are sacred groves can be deduced from the general taboo on tree felling within them and their association with the village deities. Since the kans have been protected since early times, they have remained free of fire, and the evergreen trees within them have survived. Ordinary deciduous forests outside the kans are swept year after year by fires set to prepare areas for planting. (Chandran and Hughes 416)

Japanese culture too has their own sacred shrine forests known as *chinju no mori* that are believed to have the presence of kami spirits. They are often related to the enforcement of non-interference. The Japanese native

religion Shinto believes in these kinds of folklores and traditions. They expressed devotion to nature and forests spirits.

There were also tales of supernatural "yokai" trees, and according to folklore, when a tree was a hundred years old, a spirit known as a *kodama* inhabited in it. The Japanese native religion Shinto emerged out of the same milieu as these superstitions and folkloric tales. It exhibited the same reverence for nature, and held that spirits (kami) could be found in distinctive natural features. Kami could inhabit an oddly shaped rock, a fierce wind, a waterfall, or an old tree. Old trees were especially significant in Shinto because people believed that they could communicate through them with the deities, and the practice of decorating sacred trees and praying to them meant that groves of old trees were essentially the first Shinto "shrines," with prayers and ceremonies taking place in a roped-off square in the middle of the grove. (Moore and Atherton 2021)

Okinawa's *Utaki* sites are examples of the sacred groves that are important to Ryukyuan religion. These spaces are located in forests and caves where deities are believed to reside. They strongly believe in the sanctity of nature and the harmonious existence of human beings and environment. It is not just an act of preservation but a spiritual practice. The Fengshui woodlands that are often linked with Taoist religious practices too are preserved as sacred. They are preserved on the basis of Fengshui principles which emphasize the harmony between humans and the ecology. The spirituality associated with them turns them into a place where biodiversity thrives.

The *Nemeton* of Celtic culture and *Gaj* of Slavic cultures are sites of sacredness in western culture. The sacred groves dedicated to the druids are the most popular ones from Celtic traditions. It goes the same with many South East Asian, American and West African cultures. The sacred groves in Yoruba, Ghana and Nigeria are other primary examples. They are believed to be the domains of ancestors and spirits and they are associated with rituals and offerings. Therefore, the existence of sacred groves dedicated to worship is prevalent across different cultures.

V. SACRED GROVES AS LIMINAL SPACES

Across the world, sacred groves emerge as motifs that are embedded in myths and religious beliefs. It can be understood through the lens of liminality. The term liminality derived from the latin word “limen” which literally means threshold. Liminal space is a space that is between as stated by Victor Turner, a British anthropologist. They are structures that exist on the margins where transformation and ambiguity occurs.

The attributes of liminality or of liminal *personae* ("threshold people") are necessarily ambiguous. Since this condition and these persons elude or slip through the network of classifications that normally locate states and positions in cultural space. Liminal entities are neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention and ceremonial. (Turner 359)

In this sense, sacred groves become a space that is between the spiritual and the material world. It is both natural and supernatural. It even becomes a divine threshold that cannot be crossed. They exist in a transitory state. They, therefore, become transitional spaces where the interactions between the divine or spiritual are made possible. They become thresholds in both physical and spiritual sense. Symbolically, they are believed to be the abode of spirits. The silence and the darkness that lurks the place often makes it supernatural when in fact the least human interfered nature of the space makes it beyond human understanding. It thereby adds a sense of mysticism to it. The physical positioning of sacred groves further reinforces their liminal character. In many traditional communities, groves are intentionally located on the outskirts of villages, at the edge where human habitation transitions into untamed wilderness. This placement is not incidental but symbolic. It marks the point where structured, cultivated space ends and the realm of the unknown, the wild and the spiritual begins. This spatial arrangement mirrors the metaphysical function of the grove which is a place where the invisible interacts with the visible and the spiritual world becomes accessible to the human realm.

The sensory experience of entering a sacred grove itself contributes to this sense of liminality. The sudden shift from open spaces to dense forests, the sounds, the subdued light and the pervasive silence or presence of natural sounds create an atmosphere that feels distinctly other. In many cultures, these sensory shifts are interpreted as indications of the presence of spiritual entities. The silence and the darkness are not merely physical features but are imbued with spiritual significance. It signals the transition from the mundane to the sacred. This is a process of transformation, where a forest becomes a sacred site.

While a complex chain of ecological processes can account for the formation of a forested landscape, its consecration as a spiritual device is a historical event that induces the conversion of the forest from a natural to a social entity: a sacred grove.

In this process, members of a community identify a specific area in the landscape as a point of contact between the invisible and the human worlds, and establish a ritualised alliance with spiritual entities that were dwelling there. This process, which can be seen to draw a patch of landscape away from the realm of natural history and marks its entrance into a realm of human history, cannot be described in ecological terms alone. (Chouin 40)

In India, groves such as the *kaavu* of Kerala or the *devarakadu* of Karnataka serve as abodes of local deities and spirits. These groves are often placed at the margins of villages and are governed by strict taboos like cutting trees, hunting or entering the grove without permission is prohibited. Rituals often involve invoking the deity within the grove, symbolizing the act of bridging the human with the divine. This reinforces the grove's role as a threshold, a space facilitating transformation and communication between worlds.

In Japan, the concept of *chinju no mori*, the shrine forests embodies a similar understanding. These groves surrounding Shinto shrines are believed to be the dwelling places of kami spirits. The entrance to the shrine is marked by a *torii* gate, a highly symbolic liminal marker that indicates passage from the profane to the sacred. The act of passing under a *torii* is a ritual crossing. It is an acknowledgment that one is leaving the ordinary world and stepping into sacred space.

The *Utaki* sites of Okinawa, associated with the Ryukyuan religion, further exemplify liminal sacred spaces. Often located in dense forests or caves, these sites are accessible only to designated female priestesses known as *noro*. These spaces are understood as channels to the spiritual world, where humans can communicate with deities and ancestral spirits. Their seclusion and inaccessibility to the general public reinforce their status as liminal spaces that is set apart, mysterious and spiritually potent.

Similar patterns are observed in African traditions. The *Osun-Osogbo* sacred grove in Nigeria is revered as the residence of the river goddess Osun. The grove exists on the outskirts of the city, physically demarcating sacred space from mundane habitation. Rituals performed within the grove are intended to maintain the balance between the community and the spiritual world, again reinforcing the liminal function of the space.

Even in Celtic traditions, the *Nemeton*, sacred groves dedicated to the Druids functioned as liminal spaces. These were not just places of worship but sites where legal

matters, spiritual ceremonies and communal gatherings occurred.

It happens within the context of invoking divine presence. The *Nemeton* stood apart from everyday life, symbolizing a sacred threshold within the landscape.

Psychologically and symbolically, sacred groves produce a profound impact. As religious historian Mircea Eliade notes,

Sacred place constitutes a break in the homogeneity of space; this break is symbolized by an opening by which passage from one cosmic region to another is made possible (from heaven to earth and vice versa; from earth to the underworld); communication with heaven is expressed by one or another of certain images. (Eliade 37)

The sacred grove is not just a protected ecological zone but a metaphysical portal that connects humans to something beyond themselves. Sacred groves around the world serve not merely as sites of ecological preservation but as deeply meaningful liminal spaces that mediate the relationship between the human and the divine. Their function as thresholds, both physical and spiritual, enables communities to structure their relationship with nature and the unseen spiritual forces that are believed to govern the world. This universal pattern across cultures underscores a profound human need to mark spaces where the sacred intersects with the mundane. Therefore, they epitomize liminality. They are simultaneously part of the physical world while being imbued with spirituality. It therefore becomes a geographical and metaphysical space.

VI. MYTHS, FEAR AND ECOLOGICAL ETHICS

Throughout human history, myths have served as powerful instruments for shaping ethical conduct, community norms and social responsibilities. Among their most profound functions is the role they play in guiding human relationships with nature. In many traditional societies, myths are not merely fanciful stories or folklore but they operate as informal ecological laws. They instil reverence, caution and even fear towards certain natural spaces particularly sacred groves, forests, rivers and mountains. This fear is not necessarily negative but rather a spiritual fear, an acknowledgement of nature's divine presence and its inherent rights. Across diverse cultures, the fear of divine punishment or the displeasure of spiritual entities functions as an effective ecological ethic, ensuring the protection of biodiversity and natural landscapes.

These myths incite people to protect and revere forest areas as divine and spiritual. They used fear as a tool to preserve them. The use of fear as a mechanism for conservation is neither arbitrary nor accidental.

It emerges from cosmologies in which nature is seen as alive, conscious and inhabited by spirits, deities or ancestral forces. These belief systems foster a biocentric worldview where humans are not the centre of creation but one among many participants in a living web of existence. Violating the sanctity of nature whether by cutting sacred trees, hunting within protected groves, or polluting rivers, is considered not just an ecological crime but a spiritual transgression with consequences.

In short, deities' domains-the lands called *bani*, the boundaries *sima*-were areas where human beings felt constrained to refrain from exploiting the environment, and moreover where they expected that environment to be pleasant. Environmental deterioration within any divinity's boundaries would surely be displeasing to that deity, and therefore, if it occurred, would be taken as a sign of waning powers. For any persons who violated a potent deity's proscriptions, by accident or deliberately, were likely to receive *parcya* or "proofs." This term may refer to any god's tangible manifestations, whether as grace or chastisement, but is used in shrine-violation accounts specifically for punishments. Perpetrators of infringements on the inviolability of deities' domains might bring a variety of unpleasant experiences upon themselves. For example, at Ghanta Rani, a goddess shrine that we visited in 1980, the honey bees protected by the goddess in turn protect her shrine by stinging anyone who soils it in any way. Sickness, blindness, maimed limbs, acute pain, and occasionally death were cited among proofs given by shrine deities to careless and heedless trespassers. (Gold and Gujar 212)

This demonstrates how the mythological narrative does not merely serve as folklore but acts as a mechanism of environmental protection. The belief that natural calamities, diseases or misfortunes are divine retributions for disrespecting sacred sites fosters a deep-seated caution and humility toward the environment. In this case, the honey bees are not simply ecological agents but spiritual guardians, a symbolic and literal embodiment of nature's protective power.

Kerala offers rich illustrations of this interconnection between myth, fear and ecological ethics. The region's folklore has stories of *Yakshis*, female nature spirits believed to inhabit specific trees such as the palmyra. These spirits are simultaneously enchanting and dangerous. According to legend, *Yakshis* lure men at night with their beauty, persuading them to climb the tree, only to kill them brutally. These tales serve as more than cautionary narratives.

They function as warnings against venturing into sacred or forbidden areas, especially at night, when such spirits are believed to be most active. The psychological impact of these stories is significant. It embeds a subconscious boundary in the community's collective psyche that certain places are not to be disturbed, not merely for practical reasons but because they are spiritually dangerous.

To extent that the peoples of Kerala traditionally view their vegetation as imbued with aspects of the sacred, those various trees, plants, groves and forests are regarded ambivalently as repositories of the sacred. Individual plants and trees are not normally considered to harbour spiritual powers or beings. Human relation with these depends on the nature of the interest in the plant resource and on the nature of the being believed to inhabit it. For example, a beneficent god residing in a tree outside a temple or in a household garden may be an object of worship. 'On the other hand, a spirit in a tree one wants to chop down for timber may be inimical and engage one in a supernatural battle for the wood. 'Demonic Sirens' called 'Yakshis', typically live in Palmyra's and lure men at night up their trunks and gory deaths. (Leela 2)

This belief is further reflected in how local communities approach the use of natural resources. For instance, before felling a tree, it is a common practice to perform rituals requesting permission from the spirit. Failure to do so is thought to result in illness, accidents or misfortune. This protocol, steeped in myth, essentially functions as an unwritten environmental regulation, limiting unnecessary exploitation and fostering respect for the natural world. Across cultures, similar patterns emerge. In Japanese Shinto, trees that are centuries old are believed to be inhabited by *kodama* or tree spirits. Cutting down such a tree without proper rituals invites curses or bad luck. Similarly, in parts of Africa, particularly among the Yoruba people of Nigeria, sacred groves are considered the abode of deities and ancestors. Violating the sanctity of these spaces by hunting or polluting is believed to bring about sickness, crop failure or communal misfortune.

The underlying logic in all these cultures is consistent and that is nature is not passive. It is animated, conscious and morally responsive. This belief structure creates what anthropologists regard as sacred boundaries, where human behaviour is tightly regulated, not through external enforcement but through internalized spiritual ethics. These boundaries, marked by physical signs or oral traditions serve as effective conservation tools. Unlike modern legal systems, which rely on surveillance and punishment, these spiritual boundaries are self-enforced through belief, fear and reverence.

From childhood, individuals are exposed to narratives that teach respect for certain animals, trees or landscapes. The fear of supernatural consequences operates as a form of internalized environmental responsibility. Rather than viewing this as mere superstition, it can be understood as a sophisticated form of ecological ethics, encoded in the cultural and spiritual frameworks of these societies. Furthermore, these belief systems often carry a dual message. While they warn of punishment for transgressions, they also offer blessings, protection and prosperity for those who live in harmony with nature. This framework creates a balanced ecological ethic where respect for nature is not only mandated but rewarded.

So, myths that instil fear of divine retribution for environmental transgressions are far more than relics of a superstitious past. They represent time-tested strategies for fostering sustainable relationships between human communities and the natural world. These narratives embed ecological ethics into the very fabric of cultural identity, ensuring that respect for nature is not a choice but a way of life. In an era of environmental crises, revisiting these traditional models of ecological duties may provide invaluable insights. Far from being obsolete, they offer a compelling reminder that the boundaries between myth, spirituality and environmental ethics are often more powerful than we acknowledge.

VII. CONCLUSION

Sacred groves in different parts illustrate the transcultural ecology of myth. They offer vital lessons for the protection of nature with the backing of cultural and religious values. They incorporate cultural and spiritual narratives into it. They powerfully illustrate the concept of transcultural ecology where myth, spirituality and environmental ethics are deeply intertwined. Far from being relics of an ancient or primitive past, these groves continue to function as living embodiments of ecological wisdom rooted in cultural and religious belief systems. They are enduring spaces where human societies negotiate their relationship with the natural world, guided by myths, rituals and spiritual traditions.

There are many narratives surrounding these groves. Whether they involve protective deities, vengeful spirits or the presence of ancestral forces embed ecological responsibilities within the moral and spiritual fabric of communities. This relationship between culture and ecology acts as an invisible but powerful law that reinforces sustainable practices. The continued existence of sacred groves offers vital lessons for modern environmental conservation.



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They demonstrate that successful and enduring ecological protection is not solely dependent on scientific policies or legal frameworks but can be strengthened when supported by cultural, spiritual and emotional connections to the land. In an era of dangerous climate change, biodiversity loss and ecological crises, revisiting and respecting these indigenous and transcultural models of conservation are relevant. It provides meaningful pathways toward more sustainable futures. Ultimately, sacred groves are testimony to a timeless truth that the safeguarding of nature is most effective when it is not seen merely as an obligation but as a sacred duty interwoven with identity, belief and community. They remind us that ecological ethics is not a modern invention but a deeply human and spiritual practice that transcends borders, languages and cultures.

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