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The Tree of Life According to C.G. Jung's Theory

The *tree of life* is a fundamental agro-lunar symbol, which expresses the unity of macrocosm (universe) and microcosm (man). According to Uno Holmberg, it is the greatest legendary creation of mankind. It can be found in Eastern, Western, Northern and Southern peoples' traditions alike with very varied forms of pictorial expression.

It is common with every depiction of the tree of life, that they are all in the center of the traditional world concept, they grow right from it. The other important traditional symbols are placed on or around them. Concerning the place value of the Tree, we can say without exaggeration, that the *tree-gestalt* is the Alpha and Omega of symbol- analysis and that it is an interdisciplinary subject matter. Now it is going to be the topic of a complex Jungist analysis.

The depictions shown below come from a book called "The Roots of Consciousness" by C. G. Jung, the discoverer of the collective subconscious. From a total number of 32 pictures in the book, I chose 16, and by changing their order, I found new possibilities for interpretation. Some of the pictures were made by sick, some others by healthy or cured patients and three of them are alchemist prints. With my lecture, I'd like to demonstrate, that the tree of life is a symbol which has a threefold message:

1. It is the symbol of the starting point of psychic development, of individualization.
2. It is the symbol of the mankind's development, of evolution.
3. It is the symbol of the integration, of contrasts, that is the target, the *coincidentia oppositorum*.

Following Jung, let's see first, which are the most common verbal associations concerning the topic of the *tree*, what we think of first, when we hear the word *tree*. Well, the following associations are the most common: growth, getting into shape both in a physical and spiritual sense, growing both from the top downwards and from the bottom upwards, protection, shade, shelter, eatable fruit,

source of life, duration, being rooted, inability to move, age, personality, death and rebirth.

I have divided the pictures into groups. The first group is called

A) The constituent parts of the tree of life

1. Beside the tree

Tree and bird, bird and tree usually belong together, but it is not true for this tree; and this bird. On the contrary, this bird in the right bottom corner has lost the key and is now weeping over it. Here it is the rootless modern man expressed by a bird tree — key — forgetfulness pattern.

2. Vertical and horizontal

The dynamic horizontal animal and the static vertical plant seem to be the co-ordinates of vividness, x and y. They can only be realistic together, without each other they are unrealistic. That is true for all the other pairs of contrasts as well.

3. Version and inversion

Twin trees stand on the shore of a lake. One of them grows from the bottom upwards, the other from the top downwards. How can both of them be true? Well, according to the Aristotelian logic nohow. If one of them is true (a tree), then the other must be false (not a real tree). In the drawing and in the psyche both of them are real, there's no choice of "entweder — oder", the two of them together build up the symbol. Jewish tradition e.g. knows about both of them.

4. Hanging from the tree of life

We can see the mythological *wak-wak* tree, which has human fruits. It is well known as a sacred tree with dead bodies hanging from it and with young people's heads blossoming on it in Persia, Turkey and the Arabian Peninsula as well as in India. The source of life and the source of death is very same. Hanging is such a conservative and ancient method of suicide.

5. Riding on the tree of death

This Buddhist tree of death is partly the opposite of the previous tree of life. The previous one could be characterized by growth, while this one is stiff and motionless like a statue. It has bare branches on seven levels with six figures sitting on each level. Maybe the picture wants to say, that it is possible not only

to live, but also to die on different levels. It is remarkable, that these figures are not hanging from the tree, but they are riding on their deaths, thus becoming eternal.

B) Trees of life and the elements

6. Earth in the tree

Tradition knows about four elements, the first of which (from the bottom upwards) is the *earth*. All the trees grow from it, this is where they are rooted. Well, this tree is earthy, massive, heavy, with a tendency to grow downwards. Its trunk is especially well-developed (thick) and so are its branches, its roots must be huge, too. It is under the influence of the earth.

7. Water in the tree

Here we can see the second element depicted as a tree. Slim as a fountain, it springs out of water, above the water level (which is below naturally). The previous tree did not succeed in growing above the earth so much as this one succeeded in growing above the water. In the original color picture its branches are also decorated with flaming red flowers.

8. Fire in the tree

We have arrived at the third element, the *fire*, which also has a corresponding tree image, which is a fire-tree with seven branches. Its branches are formed in flames, which illuminate the inside of a hole, a cellar or a cave. Anyway, it's got a *menorah*-shape, which is known from Jewish mythology. It symbolizes the seven planets and it originates from Mesopotamia

9. Air in the tree

As we can see, the tree can integrate all the four elements. This one here happens to integrate the fourth. It is a little airy arbor aurea with ripe, golden leaves falling from it on the original picture. Supported by its branches its only fruit, the Sun can be seen. But if its fruit is the Sun, then it must originate from above, from the Sun . itself, too. This tree has reached its target: it managed to grow up from the bottom, it could reach the air. (Compare it with first massive

tree.) Lapis ex quator elementis compositus. (The philosopher's stone must be made of the four elements.)

C/ The tree and man's development

10. Tree guarding treasure

Every tree hides an immanent treasure. All of them do; especially under the ground among or inside its roots. What? First of all, liveliness, *vitality*. This treasure belongs to those who can find it, who are capable of noticing it. As the old alchemists say: "The way it is outside, it is inside".

11. Hero looking for treasure

One must search for the treasure, and the one who does it with enough strength and determination is a hero. Young hero enters from the right followed by a little dragon as by a slavish spirit. Young hero touches the tree, but it seems, he does it a bit too early, for as an answer, flame shoots up from the tree. The root of the tree resembles an old man's hand. It is clutching the treasure box. Conflict of generations: "Give me the money!" — "No, I won't." It is not the same to take it away and to take it over.

12. Woman in the tree

The hero has got a partner too, but she is not always a heroine. This woman is still in the tree: she is still preoccupied with herself, with her own petty life. She enjoys being inside, being immanent too much. The only thing she can think of is the tree and domestic animals. She is childish, she is not independent. She hasn't come out of, and down the tree, out of the woods, although a snake is bending to her ear as if whispering: "What are you waiting there for? Come on, leave the tree!"

13. The independent woman

She is not over-involved with vegetation as the previous woman is. She has placed herself in the middle, she is put in the center of the world, which is her adequate place. It is not mere chance, that she is the one who's placed there. She is the female equivalent of the young hero. Four animals and plants are surrounding her from the top, from the bottom, from the left and from the right.

She is in harmony with herself and the nature, but she still has a lot to do. She isn't in an easy situation.

14. Tree curving dog

It is a revealing movement, a symptomatic bending over. What does it mean? It means, that the person who drew it, is not straight, is not healthy, he/she is sick. He/she must be in a physical and psychological trouble, and is now fighting it. He/she is trying to straighten again or reaching back to the ground to gain strength from it. There is an interesting saying in Hungarian, which suits here: "Should I be incurved like this, if what I am saying is not true".

15. The development of a woman

It is an alchemist print. It depicts Eve, who is the female aspect of the Prima Materia. How can lead turn to gold, how can the woman develop from her static, vegetative state of being tied to the tree into the dynamic, pneumatic state of getting free from the tree. The picture shows seven steps of the transformation (the unity of seven!). The woman's development starts from being inside the tree and finishes with getting outside of the tree, that is from immanence to transcendence. At the end of her development, she meets the royal man (crown) with lightening and sword in his hands.

16. Man's development

It is also an alchemist print. It depicts Adam, Eve's man. Three stages can be seen here: confrontation — getting injured — blossoming. Until there's no confrontation there's no injure, and the same way, until there's no injure, there's no blossoming. Adam lying horizontally on the ground confronts with celestial Eve (Moon). Above him on the left there's a hand and on the right there's the Moon. Mercury's arrow hits him in the chest on the right. His phallus starts to grow as a tree of life and starts to seed. Conjunction, the encounter of heaven and earth is the result of meeting powers which perform their effect from up downwards and from down upwards. According to Jung's philosophy all this happens on the Ego — Selbst axis. This axis is demonstrated by the sixteen pictures I chose.

I have to emphasize, that it was not my purpose to analyse single pictures of trees, but much rather to present a series of pictures which depict man's psychic

contents and to follow the changes of man — tree — picture. That is in fact the examination of human evolution.

It seems, that — in harmony with the research of H. Silberer, C.G. Jung, M. Eliade and some others — alchemists themselves meant alchemical operations the same way and it was not at all their purpose to produce real gold (*aurum vulgi*), but it was to model the human psychic states and processes and to develop it and make it more and more perfect *ad infinitum* (the perfect human being).

According to the interpretation of alchemy above, the Jungist complex psychology came to the same conclusions as real, serious alchemists did, which conclusions are worth summing up shortly. Depictions of trees seem to be a good basis for doing so.

Tree-gestalt is an indispensable aid of self-expression and self-development for those people of all ages who look for their own souls. If we do not want our present knowledge about the psyche to remain sterile and abstract, beside the more precise the better words we need adequate, the more lively the better pictures, too.

So that mankind should not lose its deepness and should not get lost in chaos, in *nigredo*, it is necessary to bring basic symbols up from the unconscious. We need a symbol which bares the notion of gradual growing and coming up by nature. The basic condition of it is man's positive attitude to his dreams, memories, imagination, which can bring about the tree diagram into which one can easily project his/her psychic contents, which are the following:

Those parts of the tree pictures which are above the surface (trunk, branch, leaves) symbolize the conscious and those which are under the ground (roots), symbolize the unconscious.

The left side of the tree is in connection with the mother, thus it is female, while the right side is in connection with the father and is male (alchemical tradition differentiates between a tree of Sun+ and a tree of Moon-). A distorted, broken, hollow tree or one which leans left or right, which deviates, is always a sign of psychic problems (complexes).

Where he/she places himself/herself, that is, his/her tree in the sheet, whether it is in the corner, at the side, or in the middle, how big and proportional his/her tree is, all these are always characteristic of the picture he/she makes about himself/herself and his/her social role he/she would like to have.

Experience proves, that trees are easy to personify. There are some people, who draw faces to their trees, which can be masculine or feminine character. This way, tree pictures always include man's relation to the woman inside (*anima*) with

male drawers, and with female drawers it includes woman's relation to the masculine picture inside (animus).

Finally, beyond the phases of the role personality and the anima-animus, the contrast of the real and false self, ego and Selbst also appears in the tree pictures. There are closed, more closed and open, more open tree depictions, there are ones which only depict themselves (closed systems e. g. branches), and there are some other kinds which are open, inspiring systems having artistic and/or sacred value.

C.G. Jung calls the process in which man's inborn, eternal potential self develops, becomes conscious and mature, individualization. It is the final purpose of every important alchemical and psychological dream-imagination series. Its stages are the following:

1. *Beside the tree*: A negative relation to ourselves, impotent state, no getting inside the tree.
2. *Vertical and horizontal*: Growing from down upwards becomes conscious, content of the unconscious come up.
3. *Inversion*: What is underground is the same as what is above the ground. Contents of the conscious and the unconscious change places mutually in harmony.
4. *Hanging from the tree of life*: The limits of life driven by instincts.
5. *Riding on the tree of death*: Life has a higher meaning — it is more than itself.
6. *Earth in the tree*: The imaginative target is solid.
7. *Water in the tree*: The imaginative target is dissolved.
8. *Fire in the tree*: The imaginative target is incandescent.
9. *Air in the tree*: The imaginative target is floating.
10. *Tree guarding treasure*: The treasure of life is hidden in the unconscious.
11. *Hero looking for treasure*: The one that is looking for treasure is determined and resolute.
12. *Woman in the tree*: Anima as an integrated part of life.
13. *The independent woman*: Anima should not be mixed up with what she seems.
14. *Tree curving down*: The opposite of connecting up and down — illness.

15. *The development of a woman*: Getting out of immanency.

16. *Man's development*: Getting into immanency.

That is *arbor philosophica*.

Jungist Association "Tree of Life", Budapest

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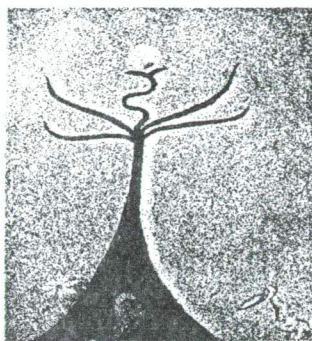
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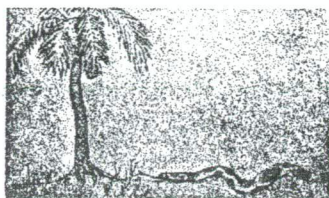
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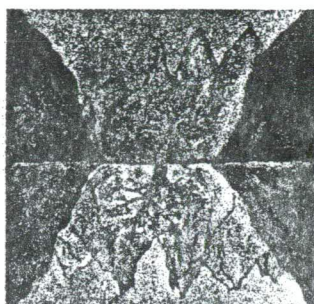
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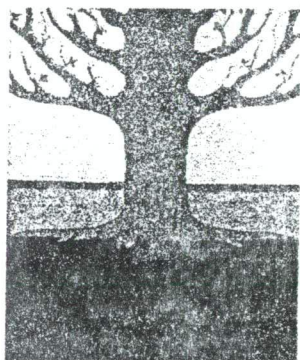
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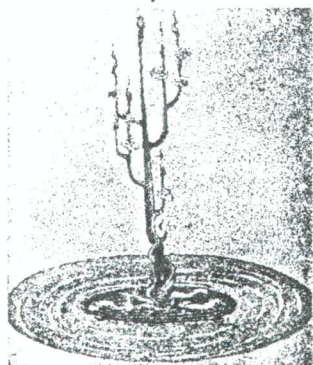
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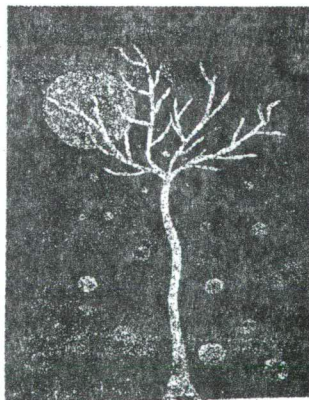
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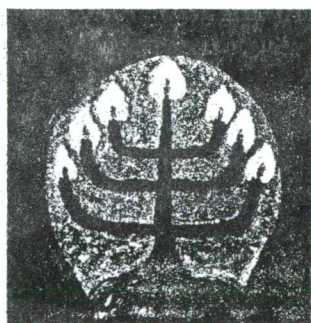
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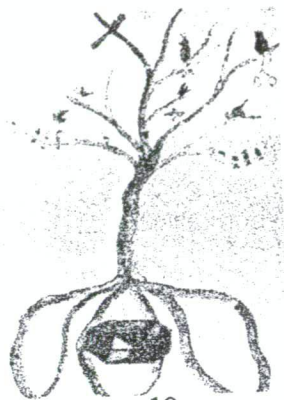
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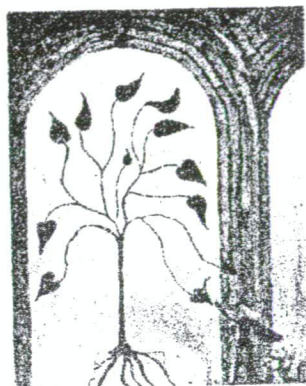
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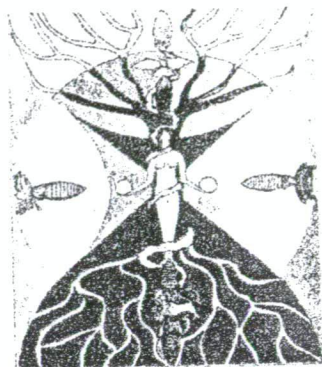
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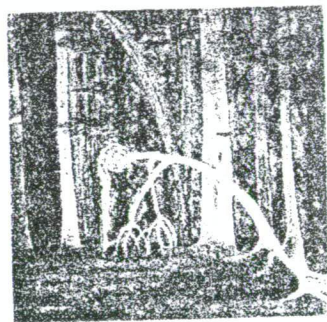
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