

ANIMALS

An African Perspective

ANIMALS: AN AFRICAN PERSPECTIVE

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One of the best ways to connect with nature is to observe animals (different species, migration patterns, body postures/movements). Most of the research you do on the internet automatically brings up animal symbolic meanings from a European perspective. I put this booklet together as a resource for those of us who are interested in learning about the meanings of animals from an African perspective.

I've got to where I am in life not because of something I brought to the world but through something I found - the wealth of African culture. - Hugh Masekela

Culture is coded wisdom. - Wangari Maathai

Antelope



Bull Antelope
Near Kafue River in Zambia.
Copyright © 2014 Paul Maritz.

What we group under the Bovidae family are cloven-footed, hollow-horned mammals which include cattle, goats and sheep. True antelope are only found in Africa and Asia. Antelope are graceful animals, slender and fast. Because of its grace and speed, it suggests the power and elusiveness of spirits. Both males and females have permanent horns.

Widely respected in Africa, antelope symbolize a good harvest. Some African ethnic groups believe antelope are responsible for teaching humans the secrets of good farming. Along the Congo River, they are symbols of skill and cunning.

Bat

There are 321 species of bats in Africa. Some believe they are spirits of the deceased.

Bull

The bull is a symbol of the masculine principle, aggressiveness and protection.

Camel

Most of the camels in Africa are located in North Africa (Kemet, Morocco, Ethiopia, Djibouti). They symbolize sobriety.

Chameleon



Outstalet's Chameleon
Ambalavao, Madagascar
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Differing from all other species of lizards, chameleons originated in tropical African rainforests. They symbolize transformation and insight.

According to the Senufo people (West African ethnic group found in Côte d'Ivoire, Mali, Burkina Faso and Ghana) “the chameleon walks as though present at the creation of the earth when the ground was soft and shook.”.

Among the Aka/Bayaka people (nomadic Mbenga pygmies found in Central African Republic and the Republic of Congo), the chameleon is considered a life-giver and sacred.

Cow

Cows have a strong connection with women in their role as nurturer. In Benin, they are a sacrificial animal. Cows symbolize the life-sustaining feminine principle.

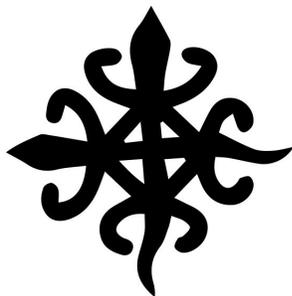
Images of cattle appear frequently in the artwork of Predynastic Egypt (before c. 3100 BC), as do images of women with upraised, curved arms reminiscent of the shape of bovine horns. Both types of imagery may represent goddesses connected with cattle. Cows are venerated in many cultures, including ancient Egypt, as symbols of motherhood and nourishment, because they care for their calves and supply humans with milk. The Gerzeh Palette, a stone palette from the Naqada II period of prehistory ©. 3500-3200 BC), shows the silhouette of a cow's head with inward-curving horns surrounded by stars. The palette suggests that this cow was also linked with the sky, as were several goddesses from later times who were represented in this form: Hathor, Mehet-Weret, and Nut. - Wikipedia

Spirit	Details
Anat	Near Eastern (Canaanite) warrior spirit who became a Kemetic Netjert in the late Middle Kingdom. She's known as the "Great Cow of Seth".
Het-Heru	Kemetic sun Netjert of the sky. Depicted as a cow or a cow-headed woman.
Mehet-Weret	Kemetic Netjert of the sky, creation, water and rebirth. Depicted as a cow. Her name means "Great Flood". She's also known as the "Celestial Cow".
Nut	Kemetic Netjert of the sky, day and wind. Depicted as a cow or a nude woman arching over Earth. Name also rendered as Nuit and Nwt.
Shentayet	Kemetic Netjert of protection. Depicted as a cow. Her name means "Widow".

Crocodile

Sacred in parts of Africa, the crocodile represents protection (seen as spiritual beings who ward off evil). Among the Venda people of South Africa, they're a symbol of their chiefs.

The Adinkra symbol Funtunfunefu-Denkyemfunefu means "siamese crocodiles" and symbolizes democracy and unity.



“The Siamese crocodiles share one stomach, yet they fight over food. This popular symbol is a remind that infighting and tribalism is harmful to all who engage in it.”

The Adinkra symbol Denykem means "crocodile" and symbolizes adaptability.



“The crocodile lives in the water, yet breathes the air, demonstrating an ability to adapt to circumstances.”

Spirit	Details
Ammit	Kemetic Netjert depicted with the head of a crocodile. She's known as the "Devourer of the Dead", "Eater of Hearts" and "Great of Death". These names are tied to her being a funerary spirit. Name also rendered as Ammut and Ahemait.
Sobek	Kemetic Netjer depicted with the head of a crocodile. He's associated with the Nile/West African crocodile (largest freshwater predator in Africa), Pharaonic power, fertility, military prowess and apotropaic qualities (capable of turning away harm/evil influences).

Elephant

Elephants have no natural enemies/predators. They are praised for their size (largest terrestrial mammal in the world), longevity, stamina, mental facilities, cooperative spirit and loyalty. Representing wisdom and maternal strength, royalty used to ride on elephants, therefore they also signify status and power. Among the Bantu, they represent brute force.

African people regard the elephant with a very deep reverence. The Zulu, Tswana and Tsonga names for the elephant all mean 'the forceful one', 'the unstoppable one'. In Zulu, the name for an elephant means to 'crash through' or 'to pierce savagely'. People believe that elephants were not merely animals but were rather supernatural beings or gods and that ivory as well as the bones of the elephant were the purest substances known. Out of ivory African people used to carve their holiest images. (Busts of gods and goddesses as well as those of god-kings and queens), and it is still believed even now that ornaments made of ivory possess great magical powers and they enable the possessor of them to enjoy heavenly protection always. - Bushwise Field Guides

Elephants symbolize strength, beauty, power, peace, royalty, dignity, patience, wisdom, longevity, good luck and happiness.

Frog

Frogs are associated with the resurrection from the dead. They're said to come and go in the underworld and therefore connected with the spirits of the dead. They're also connected with fertility.

Spirit

Details

Heqet

Kemetic Netjert of fertility. Depicted as a frog. Name is also rendered Hekat.

Giraffe

African culture has the most respect for giraffes. They even known as “Africa’s Gentle Giant”.

There are many cave paintings and illustrations of giraffes all over Africa from early civilization that often depicted giraffes in various drawings showing them in high regard. The heritage of this particular animal was found in that continent and continues to be the only place in the world that they still freely roam in the wild. Many found the giraffe to be a symbol of uniqueness. - Giraffe World

Giraffes represent grace and symbolize achievement, uniqueness, perceptiveness and knowledge.

Hare

Among the Bantu, the hare is a symbol of skill and cunning. Among the Khoisan, they’re symbols of stupidity. In Kemet, they symbolized procreation and immortality.

In Egyptian myth, hares were also closely associated with the cycles of the moon, which was viewed as masculine when waxing and feminine when waning. Hares were likewise believed to be androgynous, shifting back and forth between the genders -- not only in ancient Egypt but also in European folklore right up to the 18th century. A hare-headed god and goddess can be seen on the Egyptian temple walls of Dendera, where the female is believed to be the goddess Unut (or Wenet), while the male is most likely a representation of Osiris (also called Wepuat or Un-nefer), who was sacrificed to the Nile annually in the form of a hare. - Terri Windling

Hippopotamus

Often referred to as “The Great Mothers”, in southern Mozambique and ancient Kemet they were revered as “goddesses”.

Spirit	Details
Taweret	An apotropaic Kemetic Netjert of childbirth and fertility. Depicted with the head/body of a hippopotamus, breasts of a fecundity figure, lion’s paws and a crocodile tail.

Hyena

Hyenas are native to Africa, Arabia, Asia, and the Indian subcontinent. They are highly intelligent. Among the Bantu, hyena are sneaky and deceptive. The Himba perceive them as hermaphrodites.

In western African tales, spotted hyenas are sometimes depicted as bad Muslims who challenge the local animism that exists among the Beng in Côte d'Ivoire. In East Africa, Tabwa mythology portrays the spotted hyena as a solar animal that first brought the sun to warm the cold earth, while West African folklore generally shows the hyena as symbolizing immorality, dirty habits, the reversal of normal activities, and other negative traits. In Tanzania, there is a belief that witches use spotted hyenas as mounts. In the Mtwara Region of Tanzania, it is believed that a child born at night while a hyena is crying will likely grow up to be a thief. In the same area, hyena faeces are believed to enable a child to walk at an early age, thus it is not uncommon in that area to see children with hyena dung wrapped in their clothes. The Kaguru of Tanzania and the Kujamaat of Southern Senegal view hyenas as inedible and greedy hermaphrodites. A mythical African tribe called the Bouda is reputed to house members able to transform into hyenas. A similar myth occurs in Mansôa. These "werehyenas" are executed when discovered, but do not revert to their human form when killed. - Wikipedia

Jackal



Black-Backed Jackal
Near Wolfsnes, Western Etosha, Namibia
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A member of the dog family (pack animals), jackals originate in Africa, Asia and southeast Europe. Among the Sotho, jackals symbolize skill and cunning. Among the Khoisan, they symbolize astuteness.

Spirit	Details
Anpu	Kemetic Netjert who ushers the souls into the afterlife. Depicted as jackal-headed. Name also rendered Ynpu, Jnpw, Inpu.
Wepwawet	Kemetic Netjer of war. Depicted as a jackal. His name means “Opener of the Ways”.

Leopard

Mostly inhabiting Asia and Africa, leopards are highly revered in African cultures as a master hunter due to their secrecy and mystery. They’re known as the Great Watcher due to their being alert and intensely aware of what’s happening around them). Their spots are sometimes called the eyes of the leopard. Leopards symbolize ferocity, aggression, cunning, boldness, agility and courage.

In Africa, leopards play a big role in the many cultures when it comes to symbolism. Leopards are seen by the people of Africa as hunters and warriors, but this is not all there is when it comes to their vision of this beautiful animal. They see leopards as cunning as well, and deceitful in all ways. People in African tribes have been living near these animals for centuries, and they always saw leopards as magnificently beautiful but at the same time dangerous and threatening. Leopard to the people of Africa represented an animal that portrayed one human characteristic perfectly, and that is deceitfulness. - Dreaming and Sleeping

All African tribes regard the leopard as an animal that symbolizes all that is noble, courageous and honorable. It is called ingwe by the Zulus. This word originally meant 'pure sovereignty' or 'pure kingship'. In very ancient times, a king who supposedly ruled over other kings was called nkwetona or the Leopard - Embodying ferocity, aggression, being the Great Watcher, and courage. Traditional cultures which use the leopard skin as ceremonial attire revere leopards, and consider it a totem animal with special powers. In European cultures, often referred to as the "Prince of darkness", whilst in Africa the natives believe that they are animal guides for the spirits of the dead, and help them to find their final resting place. Their eyesight is among the keenest of all animals on land, enabling them to hunt at dusk and dawn when the light is not its brightest. This characteristic greatly contributes to the idea that they are indeed imbued with the ability to see what others cannot. A Leopards colouring helps it to camouflage itself from predators and prey, this characteristic lends itself to their virtue of 'shape shifting' and their ability to fool those who seek to harm them. The Leopard possesses many animal virtues that are powerful and valuable and which any person would be wise to emulate or divine. One who has the power of the Leopard will see enhanced personal power and self-confidence, gracefulness and stealth! - Bushwise Field Guides

Lion

Among the Bantu, lions represent brute force. In Kemet, they represented the heat of the sun.

As you might expect, the lion is a symbol of authority and strength in African cultural history. There are also African legends in which the lion is presented as a great diplomat. Stories describe the lion as a great orator and communicator. The lion often employed skill and strategy to negotiate harmony amongst all the animals in the African savannas. The African lioness (female) is associated with the moon, and is a symbol of fierce motherhood and protection of her pride. - Avia Venefica

Lions are symbols of royalty, strength, conquest, valor, pride, wisdom, authority, courage and protection. The lioness represents the moon, femininity and fierce motherhood.

The Zulu word for lion means 'the master of all flesh'. This name consists of two words, ngo, meaning very high, and nyama (Ngonyama), which means 'flesh' or power. Another Zulu term for lion is ibubesi, meaning 'to make the final decision', supporting the belief that the lion is king of the beasts. - Bushwise Field Guides

Spirit	Details
Apedemak	Nubian spirit of the Meroitic people. A war spirit, he's depicted as a three-headed lion with four arms as well as a lion-headed snake or a lion-headed man.
Bast	Kemetic Netjert originally depicted as a lioness.
Dedun	Nubian spirit of incense, prosperity and wealth. He's depicted as a lion and associated with fire and funerary rites (protector of deceased Nubian rulers). Name also rendered Dedwen.
Maahes	Nubian spirit of war, weather and protection and son of Bast. He's depicted as a lion.
Mehit	Kemetic Netjert of protection. Depicted as a lioness. Name also rendered Mehyt.
Pakhet	Kemetic Netjert of war. Depicted as a lioness. Her name means "She who scratches" or "The One Who Tears Apart".
Sekhmet	Kemetic Netjert originally depicted as a lioness (later as lioness-headed). She's a sun Netjert, fierce warrior, healer and protector.
Tefnut	One of the first Kemetic Netjeru created by Atum, she is the Netjert of moisture, dew and rain. Depicted as a lioness or a lion-headed woman.
Weret-Hekau	Kemetic Netjert of protection. Depicted as a lioness and a snake. Her name means "the Great of Magic", "Great Enchantress".

Monkey

Humorous and social creatures, they represent comedy and friendship. Monkey's symbolize mischievousness and curiosity.

Rhinoceros

Symbol of agility, wisdom, freedom, stability, gratitude, longevity, grounding, peace of mind, confidence and unconventionality.

Snakes

Snakes are either considered to be messengers of the ancestors or incarnations of them.

For the Dahomeans, the spirit of the serpent was one to be feared as he was unforgiving. They believed that the serpent spirit could manifest itself in any long, winding objects such as plant roots and animal nerves. They also believed it could manifest itself as the umbilical cord, making it a symbol of fertility and life. - Wikipedia

In Egyptian myth, the state of existence before creation was symbolised as Amduat, a many-coiled serpent from which Ra the Sun and all of creation arose, returning each night and being reborn every morning. Also, the snake biting its tail (Ouroboros) symbolised the sea as the eternal ring which enclosed the world. In Egypt the snake has healing abilities. Hymns and offerings were made to it since it was believed that the Goddess could manifest through the snake. "In a hymn to the goddess Mertseger, a workman on the Necropolis of Thebes relates how the goddess came to him in the form of a snake to heal his illness. - Wikipedia

Spirit	Details
Apophis	Kemetic chaos monster who's known as the "Great Rebel" and "Evil One". Depicted as a snake (sometimes a huge crocodile).
Ayida-Weddo	In Haitian Vodou, she is the wife of Damballah and known as the "Rainbow Serpent". She's believed to hold up the sky.
Damballah	In Haitian Vodou is a loa and husband of Ayida-Weddo. Depicted as a serpent.
Danh	Rainbow spirit of the Dahomey. Not only was he depicted as a snake (with his tail in his mouth - symbol of unity and wholeness), but his messengers were a "small variety of boa". Name also rendered as Danh-gbi. In Haitian Vodou, he's called Dan Petro.

Mami Wata	Water spirit associated with fertility and healing. Depicted as a woman holding a large snake or with the lower body of a serpent (sometimes a fish).
Meretseger	A guardian and protection Kemetic Netjert. Depicted as a cobra. Her name means “She Who Loves Silence”.
Nehebkau	Kemetic Netjer who guarded the entrance to Duat (the underworld). Depicted as a serpent with human arms or legs. Name also rendered Nehebu-Kau or Neheb Ka. His name means “(one who) brings together Ka”.
Renenutet	Kemetic Netjert of fertility and luck. Depicted as a cobra. Her name means “The Snake Who Nourishes”.
Simbi	In Haitian Vodou, he is a serpentine loa.
Wadjet	Kemetic Netjert of protection. Depicted as a cobra.

Turtle

Among the Bantu, turtles symbolize patience and strong will. In Kemet they were associated with the Underworld because they’re aquatic. Turtles symbolize intelligence and prudence.

Because turtles can live in water as well as on land, they are considered to be intimate friends of the god of rain and the water spirits. - Heike Owusu

Spirit	Details
Ijapa	A tortoise and trickster of Nigeria. He’s also known as Mbe nwa Anigia among the Igbo.

Zebra

Closely related to donkeys and horses, zebras only inhabit Africa. Zebras symbolize freedom, individuality, overcoming challenges, friendship, community, protection, and unity.

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